DEMOCRACY'S RIGHT

CHRISTOPHER G. NUTTALL

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Annotation

The Empire — a tyranny stretching over thousands of worlds. The grand dreams of the founders are a joke. The Thousand Families, the rulers of the Empire, care nothing for anything, save their own power. From the undercity of Earth to the new colonies at the Rim, discontent, anger and rebellion seethe, but there is no hope of breaking the power of the Empire and freeing the trillions of enslaved humans and aliens.

The Rebel — Commander Colin Walker believed in the Empire, until a treacherous superior officer betrayed him, forcing him to see the true nature of the force he served and his compliancy in terrible crimes. Now, Colin has a plan; he and his followers in the Imperial Navy will seize their ships and rebel against the Thousand Families, uniting the thousands of rebel factions under his leadership. Their war will set the galaxy on fire…

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Author's Note

Dear Readers,

The book you hold in your hand (at least on your kindle) is a heavily-revised version of book one of my second major space opera trilogy — *The Democracy Series*. The previous versions can be found on my website under 'free books.' However, I feel that this revised version adds a great deal to the universe — and I would advise you not to assume that anything that happens (or doesn't happen) in the first version will happen in the second.

If you want a sequel, please let me know and post reviews on Amazon. At the risk of sounding awfully mercenary (sorry) I write sequels to books that sell well.

As always, I would be grateful if you email me to point out any spelling mistakes, placing them in context. I can offer cameos, redshirt deals and suchlike in return.

Have fun! And if you want a fourth book, let me know…

Christopher Nuttall

Chapter One

Night was falling over Jackson's Folly as Commander Colin Walker walked down the street towards the isolated bar, keeping a safe distance from the crowds of spacers milling about and trying to relax before they boarded their shuttles and returned to their ships. Like almost every other planet Colin had visited, Jackson's Folly possessed a place where spacers could come to relax after serving on their ships — and be separated from their hard-earned wages by bars, girls and other entertainments. He smiled to himself grimly as he saw a group of Imperial Navy crewmen lining up in front of a brothel, swapping pipes of recreational drugs while waiting for their turn at the girls. The Observation Squadron allowed a third of its crewmen to take shore leave at any given point and they didn't hesitate to take advantage of it. Anything beat serving on starships waiting in orbit for the hammer to fall.

Colin scowled as he turned the corner and passed a group of local law enforcement personnel, watching the Imperial Navy crewmen nervously. It hadn't taken long for the Imperial Navy to wear out its welcome on Jackson's Folly — if they had any welcome at all — yet dealing with rowdy crewmen risked provoking an incident. With factions in the Empire's local Sector Command keen to provoke an incident, in order to annex Jackson's Folly and its daughter colonies to the Empire, giving them any ammunition at all was a dangerous idea. The entire planet knew that it was only a matter of time before the Empire finally decided to move against them and the presence of the Observation Squadron was nothing more than a chilling reminder of the sheer power arrayed against them. Jackson's Folly might, if they had another two hundred years of relative independence, been able to stand off the Imperial Navy, but it was too late. The datachip in his pocket felt heavy as he strode down the street, reminding him of what it carried. The die was about to be cast.

He noticed a handful of spacers looking at him, wondering who and what he was, and smiled, for he looked nothing like the sober XO of HMS *Shadow*. He was tall and gaunt, with a balding head and piercing blue eyes, his face covered with two days worth of stubble. The gun he carried openly on his hip wasn't an Imperial Navy-issue weapon, a touch intended to convince any observers that he was from one of the independent starships orbiting the planet. The leather jacket he wore over a standard shipsuit only added to the ensemble. Once the meeting was done, he would return to a small apartment on the planet, change back into his uniform and catch the first shuttle back to *Shadow*. No one would know that he had even left the ship.

A cry split the air — a cry of happiness from one of the local casinos, where spacers gambled away most of their wages — and he smiled, even though it was a bitter reminder that he could never be as happy or carefree as them. A group of Imperial Navy crewmen spilled out of the building and headed towards the nearest crewman's bar, where they would drink away their winnings. Colin envied them at that moment, knowing that they still believed in the Imperial Navy… or perhaps they just didn't care. None of them had ever climbed high enough to understand the true nature of the system they served, or to be able to do anything about it.

The thought was a bitter one. A decade ago, Colin had been a young and ambitious tactical officer, intent on winning his own command before he was twenty-five. He'd been easy prey for Commodore Percival, who had been equally intent on securing a promotion to Admiral and being appointed Sector Commander. Colin had been proud when Percival had approached him and offered the young officer his patronage, the patronage that he needed to reach higher rank. It hadn't been easy, but Colin had carried out his side of the bargain and accomplished the impossible; he'd made Percival look good. And Percival had received his coveted promotion.

In return, Percival had exiled him to a patrol base with little hope of escape.

The shock had opened Colin's eyes and revealed the true nature of the Empire. His shattered dreams were nothing compared to its vast crimes against humanity. The Thousand Families ruled the Empire with a rod of iron, suppressing dissidence and rebellion… and Colin had helped them do it. The system was guilty and he, who had served the system, was guilty too. He didn't want to admit it, but he had no choice; if he'd been promoted, he would have continued to serve the Empire. As it was, he'd spent ten years putting together a plan of his own. His hand touched the datachip in his pocket again. One way or another, the die was definitely about to be cast.

Colin pushed open the door and stepped into the bar. It was a typical spacer's bar, with drink on tap, a number of female bartenders and a pair of women doing a pole-dancing routine on the stage. Colin glanced up at them for a moment, taking in the handful of spacers watching them while getting thoroughly drunk, and then walked through the second set of doors and into the Captain's Club. The bar catered to trader captains who wanted to pick up commissions and share lies about their exploits with their fellow captains and the horde of admiring groupies that congregated around them. Business had been falling recently, Colin knew; the presence of the Imperial Navy was a powerful deterrent to independent traders who might operate on the wrong side of the law. He picked up a glass of beer from the

inner bar, sampled it quickly, and stepped into one of the private cubicles. His fellow conspirators looked up at him as he took his seat. They knew, he suspected, just what he had to say.

He pulled a privacy generator out of his pocket and placed it on the table, where it linked into the other privacy generators — one per person — and created a jamming field surrounding the room. In theory, the generators would make it impossible for any kind of surveillance probe or sensor to operate within their field, keeping their conversation strictly private. In practice… Colin knew that it was something of a gamble. Imperial Intelligence had successfully pressed for the devices to be banned all across the Empire, but it was easy to obtain them with the right connections. A suspicious mind might wonder if Imperial Intelligence already knew how to penetrate the fields — or even to detect them — and had passed the ban merely to lure criminals and rebels into a false sense of security.

"Thank you all for coming," he said, as he took his seat. "The balloon is about to go up."

He glanced from face to face as the news sank in. The six inner members of his conspiracy — they were far from the only members, but they were the most important — had all known that time was running out. Ever since Colin had approached them, one by one, and started talking about rebellion against the Empire and the Thousand Families, their lives had been hanging by a thread. A single careless word could have betrayed them to one of the army of security officers on the Observation Squadron.

"A dispatch boat arrived five hours ago," Colin continued, pulling the datachip out of his pocket and inserting it into the reader he'd bought with him. "It carried this dispatch for Captain-Commodore Howell. Commodore Roosevelt" — he kept his voice level with an effort — "will be arriving with her superdreadnaughts within one standard week, travel times permitting. Once she arrives, Jackson's Folly will be declared a world in rebellion against its rightful masters and she will take whatever steps are necessary to place them under Imperial control. We have to act now."

He keyed the reader and watched as the message played itself out in front of his small group. Commodore Roosevelt, one of the more well-connected officers in the Empire and a client of Admiral Percival, clearly had plans for Jackson's Folly and its people. The Roosevelt Family was already the dominant power in Sector 117, which bordered Jackson's Folly and its daughter worlds. They intended, Colin suspected, to get their own claims in first and prevent the rest of the Thousand Families from looting the system.

That thought, too, was a bitter one, but it had to be faced, even though he had dared to hope that Jackson's Folly would be able to

stand off the Empire. Centuries ago, just before the Great Interstellar War, Tyler Jackson had believed that the two main human powers — the Federation and the Colonial Alliance — would go to war, destroying several hundred years of human expansion and settlement. He'd invested in nineteen massive colony ships, each one larger than anything built before, and recruited thousands of colonists to head out into the great unknown, thousands of light years from Earth. They'd spent a hundred years travelling before they'd even started to look for a new home and, when they'd finally discovered an Earth-like world, they'd settled on it and started to build their utopia. It hadn't worked out too badly for them, Colin conceded; seven hundred years of growth had led to the settlement of thirteen daughter colonies and a thriving economy. If they'd only travelled a little further away…

But they hadn't and the Empire had stumbled across their worlds. Jackson's Folly's population — the Follies, as they called themselves, partly in jest — might have hoped that the Empire would leave them alone, but Colin knew better. The Observation Squadron was only the first step towards annexing Jackson's Folly to the Empire, if only to prevent their example from causing unrest among the Empire's teeming population. Now… a squadron of superdreadnaughts, the most powerful starships in existence, would ensure that Jackson's Folly would have no hope at all of successful resistance. The Follies had done what they could, when they realised the sheer scale of the threat, but it was too late. They were at least fifty years behind the Empire, at least in the technological field. The Observation Squadron alone could have punched through their defences, although it would have been costly. The superdreadnaughts were merely icing on the cake.

"…It has been deemed, by the Imperial Judiciary, that after a *careful* and *unbiased* study of the evidence, that Tyler Jackson took loans from various combines to outfit his colony fleet," Commodore Roosevelt continued, her youthful face contrasting oddly with the syrupy hypocrisy of her words. Colin felt hatred deep within his breast and he pushed it down angrily, needing to keep his thoughts clear. Commodore Stacy Roosevelt had claimed the position Colin had earned, after he'd ensured that Commodore Percival would be promoted to Admiral and given control of an entire Sector. It had taken Colin ten years to climb back up to his current position and, by then, his hatred of his betrayer had become hatred of the entire Empire. It was a brutal system that was sucking the life out of the entire human race. "They therefore owe interest payments on the order of several *trillion* credits to their heirs of those combines — that is, the Roosevelt Family. If they refuse to pay, their assets will be taken and used to pay their debts."

Colin tapped the reader and the image vanished. It still puzzled him how the Empire could have taken so long to make a decision that everyone in power knew was inevitable, but then Jackson's Folly represented the largest prize the Empire had seen in quite some time. The handful of isolated Rogue Worlds or the black colonies along the Rim were hardly worth the effort involved in subjecting them to Imperial rule. Jackson's Folly, on the other hand, had its own industrial base and a trained workforce, one that could be put to work for the glory of the Roosevelt Family and the expansion of the Empire. Whichever Family ended up with the lion's share of the proceeds would be in a position to control the next wave of expansion past Sector 117. The Roosevelt Family's enemies had probably considered it worth the attempt to prevent them claiming supreme — or even sole — control over the independent system. Their delaying tactics had finally run out.

"So, that's it then," Daria said. The red-haired woman smiled, humourlessly. "It's time to either shit or get off the pot."

Colin, despite himself, smiled, for Daria had a talent for cutting right to the heart of any problem without delay. She was the leader of the Freebooter League; a union of independent starship captains trying to remain free of the massive shipping combines that shared out the Empire's shipping trade between them, a position that had made her a target for Imperial Intelligence and its secondary security units. If they had known that Colin had made contact with her — and, through her, the rebels and black colonies past the Rim — they would have had a collective heart attack. The price on her head just kept growing.

He studied his other conspirators openly. Commander Khursheda Ismoilzoda was a dark-skinned woman, who had been exiled to the Observation Squadron after refusing the sexual advances of a well-connected superior officer. Unusually for the Imperial Navy, she was from Earth itself, having fought her way off the planet and into the Imperial Navy. The scar that ran down her cheek was a chilling reminder of her early life before she'd escaped into space and left Earth behind forever. Lieutenant-Commander Dave Howery, in contrast, was taller than Colin, with short brown hair and an irrepressible smile. Like Colin, he had trusted in the wrong superior officer; his patron had ensured that Howery had taken the blame for his patron's mistake, a mistake that had led directly to a very valuable starship spending several months in a shipyard while its drive nodes were stripped out and replaced.

Colonel Neil Frandsen was very different. Short and stocky, as all Marines seemed to be, he had been exiled to the Observation Squadron after refusing orders from a superior officer. The Marine unit under his command had captured half of a black colony,

including hundreds of non-combatant women and children, but the fighters were still holding out in the other part of the colony, presenting the Marines with a formidable tactical challenge. His superior had ordered him to start executing the women and children in order to make the fighters surrender, an order Frandsen had refused in horror. He'd been relieved of command and ordered back to the transport ship, a decision that had saved his life when the rebels had blown the colony and killed themselves rather than submit to the Empire.

Major Vincent Anderson, Security Officer, was the final member of Colin's inner circle and perhaps the most important. Colin still didn't understand why the Security Officer had come to him and asked to join, rather than arresting him for planning to rebel against the Empire. Anderson, whose bland face was somehow instantly forgettable, had been worth his weight in any substance Colin cared to name, identifying Imperial Intelligence's agents within the squadron and even a handful down on the planet. After all, they all reported to him. Colin knew that there might well be agents who didn't report to Anderson — the Empire wasn't very trusting, even of its most loyal servants — but they could be handled. Or so he hoped. It was quite possible that Imperial Intelligence was playing a waiting game and planning to wipe out his entire conspiracy in one sudden blow.

Colin's lips twitched. If the game was easy, he reminded himself, anyone could play.

"We can take the ships, of course," Anderson said. Colin nodded. Taking the Observation Squadron wouldn't be hard, not with the Marines and most of the senior crew on his side. "The real problem is taking the superdreadnaughts. If something goes wrong…"

"We lose," Colin agreed. The Imperial Navy suffered quite a few mutinies each year, with starship crews taking their ships and vanishing out somewhere beyond the Rim. The Empire would not be significantly concerned if the entire Observation Squadron went rogue, for the largest combat unit in the squadron was a battlecruiser. Colin knew that he could cause havoc within the sector with the Observation Squadron, but it wouldn't be a threat to the entire Empire. For that, he needed superdreadnaughts — and no mutiny had ever succeeded onboard a superdreadnaught. "The timing will be tight, but we will not lose."

"And then we have to capture the Annual Fleet," Daria reminded him. "If we can do that, we become a major threat to the entire Empire."

Colin nodded. There was no shortage of rebels in and outside the Empire, but without a proper military they couldn't hope to overthrow the Thousand Families or even fight them to a standstill. Back when

he'd been stranded on the patrol base, he'd realised that as long as the Empire held most of the industrial nodes and shipyards in human space, it was effectively unbeatable. It stretched across thousands of light years and had trillions of humans caught within its rule. Even so, its main weakness was its ponderous nature. It would take time for the Empire to deploy massive reinforcements to Sector 117, reinforcements that would arrive too late — if Colin took a squadron of superdreadnaughts.

"This is it," he said, softly. It had taken two years to build up the conspiracy, two years of knowing that a single mistake would bring Imperial Intelligence down on his head. "This is the best chance we will have for years, if at all. If we don't move now, we may as well admit that we're never going to move at all."

There was a long pause. They had all — the Imperial Navy and Marine officers, at least — sworn to uphold the Empire. It had taken time for their faith in the Empire to be badly shaken and destroyed, lifting the scales from their eyes and showing them the true nature of the beast they served. Colin remembered the naive young officer he had been and winced. There had been a time when he had been proud to wear the blue uniform of the Imperial Navy, back when the universe had been full of promise. Now… now he knew that he had worked to keep worlds under an iron hand.

"The factions out past the Rim won't wait," Mariko said, slowly. Daria's aide spoke softly, but with genuine conviction. Where Daria was bold and brash, Mariko seemed to fade into the background, barely noticed by anyone. She was small, with classical oriental features, yet there was nothing wrong with her mind. Colin privately admired her, although he would have been hard pressed to say what he admired about her. "They had great hopes for Jackson's Folly."

"True," Frandsen agreed. "I suggest that we move now. If we allow Jackson's Folly to be invaded and occupied, we become just as guilty as those we used to serve. We can take the ships, Commander. You only have to give the word."

"Yes," Anderson agreed. "We have to jump now or never."

Colin nodded. "Commodore Roosevelt said that she would be here in a week," he said. He knew better than to rely on that statement. The vagaries of the Flicker Drive and schedule creep made all such statements estimates at best. "If we move in one day from now…"

He listened to their comments, drawing up the final version of the operations plan, and then they scattered, heading back to their ships. Colin left last, finishing his beer and walking back out onto the streets. Unlike most spacer bars he'd visited, the beer tasted better than something that had come out of the wrong end of a horse. It would be a shame to lose Jackson's Folly. The worlds had so much potential.

Colin shook his head as he walked back to the small apartment. They didn't dare ask anyone on the planet for help, even for the smallest detail. If the Empire suspected that Jackson's Folly was involved in Colin's rebellion, their response would be swift and brutal. The planet would be scorched, killing all seven billion humans on the surface. It could not be allowed.

He pushed the thought out of his head. They would have to operate alone, but they could do it. Besides… what did they have to lose?

Chapter Two

"Another emergency drill, Commander?"

"Yes, sir," Colin said, calmly. He'd run emergency drills at least twice a week ever since *Shadow* and the remainder of the Observation Squadron had taken up position near Jackson's Folly. The battlecruiser and its attendant ships hadn't had a properly drilled crew when Colin had taken up his position and fixing it had been his first priority. After all, they were orbiting a world that had good reason to hate the Empire and might just be considering launching a pre-emptive strike against the Observation Squadron. Later, it had become an excellent way to spot and recruit talent for the conspiracy. "It keeps the crew on their toes."

Captain-Commodore Thomas Howell nodded, already bored with the conversation. In a rational universe, Howell would have made an excellent scholar or perhaps a gardener, rather than the commander of eighteen starships orbiting a hostile world. He was in his late seventies — thanks to regeneration treatments, he looked around fifty — with short white hair and a perpetual impression of being distracted by some weightier thought. He was a client of Commodore Roosevelt, who had pulled strings with Admiral Percival to ensure that Howell was placed in command of the Observation Squadron. Perversely, as Howell had orders to avoid causing any incidents until Commodore Roosevelt and her superdreadnaughts arrived, it made Colin's life easier. He could afford to rotate a third of the crew down to the surface at any one time.

The Imperial Navy's design philosophy was based around over-engineering. *Shadow* had a crew of over two thousand officers and crewmen, but Colin could have fought the ship with only a five hundred-strong crew onboard, thanks to the heavy redundancies built into the battlecruiser. The Imperial Navy tended to dislike automated systems — artificial intelligence was banned in the Empire — yet even the most reactionary commander couldn't avoid using at least a limited degree of AI. No human mind could hope to handle a missile duel between starships, juggling both offense and defence along with manoeuvre and damage control. The crew's electronic servants had to be trusted to handle the defence.

"Excellent, Commander," Howell said, finally. "And has there been any update from Sector Command?"

The honest answer to that was yes, but Colin wasn't supposed to know about the private message Commodore Roosevelt had forwarded to Howell. It had been included in the standard data dump from Camelot — Sector 117's Imperial Navy base — yet it had been flagged

for Howell personally and should have simply been dumped into his terminal. Colin had subverted some of the crew working in the communications section and had them copy every private message received by Howell into a storage node for his later inspection. It had provided an unusual window into the operations behind the scenes, including how the Roosevelt Family intended to share out the booty from Jackson's Folly.

"No, sir," Colin said. There was no way to know if Howell had already seen the private message or if he just hadn't checked his terminal yet. "We are merely waiting for the next update from Admiral Percival."

Howell nodded again. Colin kept his face blank, even though inside he was seething. Howell wasn't remotely suited to command a starship and it showed; hell, part of the reason Colin had been offered the post of XO had been because Howell had wanted an XO who could, effectively, run the ship. It was lucky that Jackson's Folly seemed determined to avoid provoking the Empire, perhaps under the assumption that the Empire needed a legal pretext to invade; Colin wasn't at all sure that the Observation Squadron could have handled itself as a unit. On paper, Captain-Commodore Howell had more than enough firepower to defeat any attack on his squadron; in reality… none of the starships had worked together before they had been thrown into a squadron and hastily dispatched to the independent system. Colin had run any number of drills since then, but most of the Captains seemed opposed to learning to work as a team.

The first emergency drill, conducted three days after their arrival at Jackson's Folly, had been a disaster. In the weeks and months since then, Colin had worked to train the crew to the point where he felt that they might be the finest battlecruiser crew in the Imperial Navy — and, more importantly from his point of view, be able to take control of their ship very quickly. The battalion of Marines carried onboard would be deployed to secure the most important compartments of the ship, while Colin's inner circle would take command of *Shadow* and the other ships in the squadron. He resisted the urge to glance at his wristcom. The time was ticking away to zero hour.

He looked up, instead, at the massive orbital display, a hologram floating in the centre of the bridge. Jackson's Folly was surrounded by hundreds of icons, each one representing a man-made construction in orbit around the planet. Orbital stations — all being hastily armed after the Empire had stumbled across the planet — floated in high orbit, while hundreds of starships flickered in and out of the system. The independent traders were allowed to operate freely within the system, although that wouldn't last. Once the Roosevelt Family had

secured control of Jackson's Folly, their private shipping line would be the only one allowed to service the new colonies. The independent traders would be driven out of the market though legal manipulations and naked force.

His eye tracked a small number of red icons, although he kept his face impassive. Tyler Jackson had lived just before the Great Interstellar War and his descendents hadn't known about many of the developments in military technology, back when humanity had fought and exterminated the Dathi. Jackson's Folly had no superdreadnaughts. The largest ship in their fleet was a battleship, a design that had been outdated centuries ago. Jackson's Folly had improved on the design, Colin had to admit, but they lacked the throw weight to stand up to superdreadnaughts or even battlecruisers, when the battlecruisers were operating as a team. No matter how he worked the problem, Colin knew the truth; Jackson's Folly would belong to the Empire when the Empire chose to take it. The only question was if they knew that their resistance would prove futile.

"I will be in my quarters, meditating," Howell said, grandly. He had spent so long in his quarters that the Observation Squadron had started to wonder if it *had* a commander. Colin didn't mind too much, although it offended his sense of the rightness of things. The thought made him smile inside; a more alert commanding officer might have noticed his XO drawing up a plan to take the squadron and turn it against the Empire. "You have the bridge."

Colin watched as Howell left the bridge and settled back into the command chair, keying the console and bringing up reports from all over the ship. The emergency drill was underway now, with Marine parties fanning out to secure vital compartments and connections, while all non-essential crewmembers were hurried back to their sleeping quarters. Oddly enough, it had been considering what Jackson's Folly could do to the Observation Squadron that had given Colin the idea, although only a handful of people knew that *this* drill was different. The Marines carried loaded weapons and had orders to prevent any attempt to retake the ship, using lethal force if necessary. One by one, the various compartments fell under his control, isolating any remaining loyalists. It all seemed to be going according to plan.

He keyed a command sequence into the console and brought up an isolated section of the datanet, the interlinked computer network that coordinated joint operations within the squadron's ships. He'd secured it weeks ago with Anderson's help, ensuring that his teams would have access to communications while the loyalists would lose their own ability to use the datanet. The crew were used to disruptions caused by the emergency drill — Colin had even taken sections of the datanet down to ensure that they knew how to operate

without the relay system connecting them to the remainder of the ship — and there should be nothing to alert anyone that there was a mutiny underway. Even if they did realise, it was already too late; the Marines had secured the armoury and the only supply of firearms on the starship.

Colin forced himself to remain calm and to avoid showing any signs of his own tension. He had put the mutiny — the rebellion — in motion, yet now its success or failure was all out of his hands. If Imperial Intelligence had an undiscovered agent within the conspiracy, he might well have signed his own death warrant. If… he shook his head inwardly, studying the display as various Marine units reported in with innocuous codes, ones that would raise no hackles if a suspicious mind happened to intercept them. The mutiny was under way and the die was well and truly cast.

His wristcom buzzed once, a pre-arranged signal from the Marine Colonel. The ship was effectively completely under their control — and helpless. If Murphy chose to put in an appearance — and he did have the inconvenient habit of appearing when he was least wanted — the Observation Squadron would find itself in serious trouble. He stood up and nodded towards the tactical officer as a fire team of four Marines appeared on the bridge. If any of the uninvolved bridge crew chose to side with the Empire, they would have no opportunity to cause havoc.

"Commander Finnegan, you have the bridge," Colin said. Lieutenant-Commander Ian Finnegan was another member of the conspiracy, a tall dark-skinned man with a long-standing grudge against the Empire. His homeworld had been devastated for refusing to pay its taxes several years ago, a bombardment that had taken the lives of his mother, father and three of his siblings. "I will be back momentarily."

He stepped off the bridge through the connecting door into Officer Country, the quarters that served the starship's senior officers and were barred to all junior ranks. The Marine sentry on guard saluted as Colin headed through the airlock and into his own compartment. He'd never bothered to collect items to fill his quarters — his only real decoration was a painting his mother had done of him on his graduation day — and so he walked across to a sealed drawer and opened it with his fingerprints. The cold metal of the chemically-propelled pistol gleamed at him as he unearthed it from the small pile of clothes and placed it on his belt. He was suddenly very aware of his own heartbeat as he loaded the pistol and checked the clips. His mouth was very dry. He'd built cut-outs into the operational plan, just so he could abort if necessary, but now he was committed.

“Idiot,” he told himself, swallowing hard. The sheer enormity of what he was about to do hit him like a sledgehammer. Whatever happened, his life would never be the same. “You were committed from the moment you started pulling people into your plot.”

As Colin had expected, Officer Country was deserted, allowing him to make his way to the Captain’s quarters without hesitation. The Marine who would normally have been on guard had been called away for other duties, leaving the Captain defenceless — unless, Colin reminded himself, Howell had stocked up on weapons and ammunition within his cabin. A Captain had effectively boundless authority while a starship was on active service and Howell could have drawn weapons from the armoury if he had felt the need. The normal restrictions on the use of firearms didn’t apply to the Captain.

Colin pressed his fingers against the sensor, at the same time tapping a certain command into his wristcom. The Captain’s quarters were now completely isolated from the datanet. The security sensors on the starship couldn’t track the use of chemically-powered weapons — a serious flaw in their coverage Colin had taken care never to point out — but there was no point in taking chances. He swallowed as the hatch swung open, allowing him to enter the Captain’s cabin.

He’d thought that his own quarters were palatial, vastly more than he needed, but Howell seemed to have an entire section for his own use. The Captain had a living room, a pair of bathrooms with real baths — crewmen had to make do with showers — and no less than three bedrooms. It wasn’t unknown for Captains to bring their latest lovers onboard and install them in their cabins, something that was technically against regulations, but was winked at by the Imperial Navy. Colin was privately disgusted by the whole concept, although part of him wondered if his disgust had more to do with envy than he was prepared to admit. The ship’s XO could bestow considerable patronage, if only on the ship itself, yet he had sworn never to abuse his authority like that. It would have made him far too much like Admiral Percival.

The thought spurred him into action and he started to look for the Captain, but Howell was nowhere to be seen. His massive living room, decorated with expensive wooden artefacts and odd paintings of women in compromising positions, was empty. Colin felt sweat trickling down his back, wondering if Howell had somehow realised what was happening and had chosen to escape his quarters and hide somewhere on the starship. He’d secured the datanet, but the Captain possessed command codes that would allow him to access and control any system from any terminal. If Howell had escape, the entire plot might be within seconds of unravelling.

"In here, Commander," Howell called. "I'm just meditating."

Colin had never entered Howell's sleeping quarters before, so he took a moment to look around as he entered the bedroom. There was a single massive bed, large enough for three people, covered in silken sheets. Howell had decorated the bedroom in more subdued colours than the living room, thankfully, although there were still several tasteless artefacts scattered around. Colin's attention was held, briefly, by a golden starship model, before he located Howell. The Commodore was sitting at his terminal, studying his private files on Jackson's Folly. Colin smiled inwardly. The files had been provided by Anderson and Colin had taken pains to ensure that many details that should have been alarming — like the fact that Jackson's Folly was distributing heavy weapons to its civilian population in preparation for an underground war against the Empire — were omitted. Colin wondered briefly if Commodore Roosevelt intended Howell to prepare a plan of operations on the surface — it seemed unlikely, but stranger things had happened — before pushing the issue aside. It didn't matter any longer.

"Ah, Commander," Howell said. He sounded mildly annoyed. "The main datanet isn't working properly. I had to use my own command codes to access data from the open sections of the datanet."

Colin studied him for a long moment. Howell was everything he detested in the Empire, an incompetent man placed in a position of power, placed there by powerful patrons over far more deserving candidates. He would whore for his position, feeding Jackson's Folly and the billions of humans who lived on the planet and its daughter worlds into the fire, just to keep his position and all the privileges that went with it. The Captain-Commodore had no sense of honour, or even of service to a higher ideal; he existed only to maintain the Empire, put in his place because he was a safe pair of hands. Cold hatred flared through his mind and he drew his pistol. Howell's eyes had only a moment to widen in alarm before Colin shot him through the head.

He had practiced with the firearm when he'd obtained it, using the Marine firing range to practice until he knew what he was doing. Even so, the noise sounded inhumanly loud in the confined space — and the blood flowing from Howell's body was definitely new. It was the first time Colin had killed someone personally — rather than serving as a tactical officer on the bridge of a starship — and it shook him more than he had expected. It took him several seconds to gather himself and catch Howell's right hand, pulling off the golden ring that marked his command of a starship. The ring wasn't just a mark of command; it allowed him to access the ship's computers and take control of any part of the datanet. Colin tensed as he pulled it onto his

own finger, wondering if there had been a mistake in the intelligence. The ring should have registered Howell's death and him as his legitimate successor, but if something had gone wrong…

The ring felt oddly heavy on his finger and he studied it thoughtfully. It was chunky, decorated with the star-and-spaceship of the Imperial Navy, glittering on his finger. Carefully, he pressed it against Howell's terminal, praying that it worked. There was a click and Howell's secret files unlocked at his touch. It had worked! Colin skimmed them quickly, marking several down for later study, before standing up and heading back to the bridge. The starship's computers had acknowledged his command authority, which meant — in theory, at least — they should have no other problems. In practice, Colin knew, they had barely begun.

"Captain," Finnegan said, when Colin entered the bridge. Somehow, hearing the title in someone else's mouth made it real. "The datanet is back up on all ships, apart from *Daffodil*. The Captain was able to destroy his command ring and lock the computers before he could be stopped."

Colin smiled as he took the command chair — *his* command chair. One ship with locked computers wasn't so much of a problem. Given time, the command codes could be removed from the network and the computers restarted. It wouldn't even be difficult. He checked the brief updates from the other ships quickly and smiled. They were all in his hands and firmly locked down. The datanets had been secured, rendering a second mutiny — a counter-mutiny — impossible.

"My friends," he said, keying the private communications channel. "The ships are ours!"

Chapter Three

"We have seventy agents in all," Anderson said, as they stood together above the main shuttlebay. "They were all captured before they could cause any damage."

Colin nodded in relief. Anderson — in his position as the starship's security officer — had located most of the agents onboard, but Howell's files had included a list of agents who reported only to Imperial Intelligence, their names unknown even to their nominal supervisor. It was quite possible, he had to keep reminding himself, that there might be a *third* group of agents, ones who were unknown even to the squadron's commander. Imperial Intelligence wasn't known for doing things by halves.

The agents had been quickly rounded up once the ships had been secured, whereupon they'd been transferred to one of the shuttlebays and secured there. The Marines had turned the compartments into holding areas, allowing the prisoners to take care of themselves, but leaving them unable to escape. Just in case, the automated systems that controlled the shuttlebay had been deactivated, rendering it impossible for even the Captain's command codes to release the prisoners. Colin was fairly certain that none of the agents had any command codes they could use to hack into the main system, but it was well to be careful.

He studied the images on the security monitors thoughtfully, stoking his chin as he moved from face to face. Most of the agents had been nonentities, crewmen and women who had done their jobs without fuss or bother, but a handful had been truly popular. One of them had been an older wiser hand for the younger crewmen to turn to if they needed help; another was effectively a whore, selling herself to crewmen who found themselves deprived of female company. She had been very popular; now, Colin wondered, how many crewmen were wondering just what they might have disclosed to her during pillow talk. It wasn't a pleasant thought. The Imperial Navy permitted relationships between crewmen — there were regulations covering the matter, although they were routinely flouted by just about everyone — and many of them became intimate. Who outside the ship, on a planet's surface or even an orbital habitat, could hope to understand the stresses of living on a starship?

"That leaves us with one question," Anderson said. "What do you want us to do with them?"

Colin nodded. He couldn't keep the agents on the ship, not when there might be other, undiscovered, agents onboard. They might attempt to liberate their comrades and recapture the ship. On the

other hand, he couldn't abandon them on Jackson's Folly either, not when the Imperial Navy would be looking for someone to blame for the mutiny. It wouldn't be hard for Public Information to make it sound as if Jackson's Folly had organised the mutiny, even though it would have been suicide. And then, he hadn't realised how many agents there actually were. No one had. There were times when he wondered if Imperial Intelligence knew how many agents they had on retainer.

"We'll transfer them to the *Garand*," he said, finally. The bulk freighter had been captured by one of the destroyers three weeks ago, after its Captain had been identified as a man with an outstanding Imperial warrant on his head. Colin would have liked to intervene and free the crew, but it was too late. They'd been shipped off to Camelot to face trial, whereupon Admiral Percival's assistant's assistant would probably review the files and order them sentenced to the nearest penal world. "Once we take the superdreadnaughts, they can take the bulk freighter and head back to Camelot."

Anderson frowned. "Do you think that that is a good idea?"

Colin blinked. "What other choice do we have?"

"We could kill them," Anderson pointed out. "We could just open the shuttlebay to vacuum and expel them all into space. They're just too dangerous to keep alive."

"They don't know anything that can be used against us," Colin countered. He didn't want to start his career with a massacre of helpless prisoners. There would be enough death in the future without making it worse. Besides, Public Information would have a field day with such an act, turning it into something comparable to a planetary scorching. "There's no point in killing them outright."

"It's your decision," Anderson said. "I just don't like the concept of loose ends."

Colin nodded. Security Officers tended towards the paranoid, particularly the ones who operated — almost alone — on starships. If they had a suspicious mind, they could blight a career — even that of a perfectly innocent crewman — just through insisting on a rigorous interrogation. Undergoing such a procedure wouldn't look good on anyone's file. He couldn't blame Anderson for wanting to lop off the loose end, but he liked to think that he stood for something better. The thought wasn't reassuring. How many other Imperial Navy ships had mutinied in the past, only to devolve into pirate ships and crews who made the Imperial Navy look harmless?

"No," he said, finally. "Besides, we are going to want to take surrenders and if they think we're going to kill them once they're helpless, they're not going to surrender to us."

Leaving Anderson behind to supervise the transfer of the

prisoners to the bulk freighter, Colin walked through the starship's corridors, inspecting the ship — his ship now, for as long as he could keep it. Part of the crew remained in lockdown — another third of the crew was being brought up from the planet's surface now, where they would be briefed — but those Colin trusted to do their jobs were working on the ship itself. Thankfully, there hadn't been a firefight for control of the ship, yet Colin knew that they wouldn't have time for basic maintenance once the superdreadnaughts arrived. His most trusted allies were already working on the message that, hopefully, would convince Commodore Roosevelt to accept that nothing had gone wrong. Others were securing the communications section, just in case. A single message from an undiscovered agent could ruin everything.

"We have switched out the magazines and loaded them for ship-to-ship combat," the weapons officer assured him, as he checked the tactical section. Captain-Commodore Howell hadn't been fond of actual weapons drills, something that Colin hadn't understood until he'd read the man's secret instructions from Commodore Roosevelt. Howell had been under orders to avoid causing any incidents between the Empire and Jackson's Folly, at least until the superdreadnaughts had arrived and the Roosevelt Family could make its claim on the planet and the infrastructure the population had built up over the years. "If it comes down to a fight…"

Colin shook his head. The Observation Squadron was powerful, but it couldn't take on even one superdreadnaught, let alone a full squadron of nine ships. If the plan failed, the only option would be to flicker out and hope that they could evade the Empire long enough to come up with a new plan. The superdreadnaughts had to be taken intact and functional. If Commodore Roosevelt managed to crash the computers, they would have to be abandoned.

"Load the internal tubes, but don't bother with the external racks," Colin ordered. It would look suspicious to any observer — as if the Observation Squadron was preparing for a fight — and they couldn't afford to arouse suspicion. He might have held Commodore Roosevelt in absolute contempt — she hadn't impressed him when they'd last met, back when he'd been Admiral Percival's client — but he had no idea who might be advising her, or commanding her ships. "Did you manage to unlock the missile control systems?"

"Yes, sir," the weapons officer said. "They're ready to fire on your command."

Colin nodded and continued walking, feeling the weight of the starship descending on his shoulders. He hadn't been responsible before, even though he'd done most of the Captain's work as well as that of the XO — even the paperwork, the paperwork the Captain was

supposed to inspect and sign personally. The thought made him smile. Over the last few months, the Observation Squadron had ordered thousands of tons of additional supplies, all ordered under Captain-Commodore Howell's name. He could operate the squadron for years, if necessary, without support from Camelot or another Imperial Navy base.

His smile faded away. He'd taken control of the ship and of the lives of the two thousand crewmembers on the vessel. They were all depending on him now, depending on him not to throw their lives away. He was the man responsible for everything. Colin looked down at the chunky ring on his finger and winced. It might have been his imagination, but it seemed to weigh more every time he looked at it. The weight of responsibility was settling in on him, pressing down on his mind.

He remembered the young officer he'd been, the intensely focused officer who had believed that he could climb to the top of the Imperial Navy through hard work and dedication. That young and naive officer would not have understood, but then — he wouldn't have understood the mutiny either. That officer would have carried on serving the Empire, crushing entire worlds and populations under its iron heel, as long as the Empire rewarded his service. It was a bitter pill to swallow, yet he had to face it squarely. Once, there had been a time when he would have given his life for the Empire he had sworn to destroy.

An hour later, he stepped into the main shuttlebay and stared down at the massed ranks of crewmen. It was traditional to assemble the duty shift in the main shuttlebay if the starship's commander needed to speak to them personally, while the remainder of the crew listened in through the datanet. A fourth of the crew should have been sleeping, or otherwise relaxing, but nothing had been normal for the past two days. The crew who had known about the conspiracy, or had been briefed in just after the ships had been taken, were relaxed, yet the remainder of the crew was nervous. Who knew what they were thinking or what they knew, other than the fact that the ship was operating on minimal levels and armed Marines had been posted at every access hatch. Colin knew that many of them had to be terrified.

He stood up on one of the smaller shuttles, suddenly realising his mind was blank. What should he tell them? He couldn't think of words to say. He had planned a series of coordinated mutinies that had taken an entire squadron of starships, but he couldn't think of the words to speak to the crew, the men and women who made the ships work. What could he tell them? Unlike Captain Howell, he didn't even have legitimate authority on his side. He could just have lied to them, he knew, but sooner or later the lie would have come out, risking

chaos. Colin focused his mind, pushing the uncertainty aside, and started to speak.

"I have taken command of the Observation Squadron," he said, flatly. By now, that wouldn't be a surprise to anyone, he suspected. It had long been joked that rumours travelled right through solid bulkheads. Hell, the Marines might have been under strict orders to keep their mouths shut, but the briefed crewmen might have passed on some of the briefing to their friends and comrades. "I am taking these ships in a mutiny against the Empire."

He continued to speak, explaining what the Empire had in mind for Jackson's Folly and just what would have happened, if he hadn't launched the mutiny against Captain-Commodore Howell. It helped that most of the crew had been enjoying their position above the threatened world, where they had access to remarkable — and cheap — facilities on shore leave. It also helped that many of the crewmen had been recruited from the lower classes of society and often felt as if their superiors didn't care in the slightest what they thought. It was another security problem, Colin knew, but it wasn't as if the Thousand Families could crew the entire Imperial Navy by themselves. Besides, Imperial Intelligence had seeded the crews with undercover agents, hoping to catch any plans for a mutiny. There would be some heads rolling back on Old Earth.

It was hard to gage reaction — no one became a crewman without some ability to hide what he was thinking or feeling — but he pressed on anyway. He told them that he couldn't promise victory, or even survival, yet they had a chance to reshape — perhaps even topple — the entire Empire. They would even have a chance for proper advancement, without the rules and restrictions that prevented anyone from the lower decks rising to a higher position. The Imperial Navy wasn't keen on officers from the lower orders, but Colin — while he'd been drilling the ship — had spotted dozens of crewmen who deserved higher ranks. The rebel fleet would definitely make the best use of its manpower. It couldn't afford to blunder along through brute force and bloody-mindedness.

"If you don't want to join us," Colin concluded, "or if you fear the consequences of victory or defeat, you are welcome to leave the ship and be transferred to a freighter that will transport you back to Camelot. If you want to stay, you will be welcome. Please make your choices now."

He watched as discussion broke out among the crew, blending together into a buzzing conversation. Many of the senior NCOs were intent on joining the mutiny — several of them had been involved right from the start, while others had learned to hate their superiors — although two of them seemed inclined to refuse to join

the mutiny. The crew seemed divided as well, although the ones with longer periods of service seemed more inclined to support the mutiny than those who had only served for a few months. Several arguments and fights broke out, only to be broken up by the NCOs before the Marines could intervene. Colin winced inwardly. He had known that some on the lower decks settled their differences through force, in carefully-supervised fights, but he had never come face-to-face with it before. Admiral Percival had mentioned it once, almost in passing; his opinion hadn't been kind.

Finally, much to his relief, most of the crew decided to join the mutiny. A handful seemed inclined to worry about threats to their families or friends back home, but only a handful decided to transfer to the freighter for transport back to Camelot. Colin felt a twinge of guilt as the Marines escorted them to the secondary shuttlebay for transfer, knowing that Imperial Intelligence would interrogate the loyalists until they were sucked dry of everything they knew about the mutiny and its leaders. He checked his wristcom and smiled as he realised that the other ships had roughly the same percentage of loyalists, although that didn't mean that they'd removed all of the intelligence agents. If he'd been assigned to spy on the crew, and his identity had remained uncovered, *he* would have joined the mutiny as well. There would never be a better chance to infiltrate the crew and damage the rebellion from within.

"Thank you, all of you," Colin said, once the final loyalists had been gently removed from the shuttlebay and escorted out. There was no need to use force; indeed, Colin understood what they were going through. He had wrestled enough with his own conscience over the rebellion, back when he'd been trapped on the patrol base, after Admiral Percival had betrayed him. Back then, the thought of betraying the Empire had been agony; it would have been easier to go after Percival instead, yet… the system itself, the one that allowed Percival to exist, was rotten. It had to be destroyed. "I hope that I will be worthy of your trust."

* * *

"We've been drilling for the last five days," Colonel Neil Frandsen assured Colin, three days after he'd spoken to the crew. It had been a hectic process. Once the loyalists had been removed, the lockdown had been terminated and the crew went back to work — with a greater will, Colin had noted, than they'd shown while *Shadow* had been an Imperial starship. "We're ready for the mission."

Colin nodded. The Observation Squadron's largest ship wasn't the

battlecruisers, but HMS *Carmichael*, a Marine Transport Ship. Colonel Frandsen commanded a full Marine Regiment, intended for emergency deployment to the surface of Jackson's Folly — if the Follies decided to do something stupid. It had apparently been easier to convince most of the Marines to go along with the Mutiny; Frandsen had paraded his men, explained what had happened and invited them to decide for themselves where their loyalties lay. It would never have worked for the Imperial Army, but the Marines were a law unto themselves. Only a handful of Marines had refused to follow their commanders and had been transferred to the freighter for transport back to Camelot.

"Thank you," he said, and meant it. Without the Marines, the next part of the mutiny would be impossible. It would have been more convenient, he admitted to himself, if the superdreadnaughts had docked at one of the orbital stations, but not even Commodore Roosevelt would take such a risk. "Are you confident of success?"

"Nothing in war is certain," Frandsen reminded him, "but we are primed and ready for the mission. Besides, they're using Blackshirts for their internal security. They don't trust their Marines."

His voice had darkened. One of the titbits Colin had discovered in Howell's files was that Commodore Roosevelt was bringing three divisions of Security Division troops to Jackson's Folly, the dreaded Blackshirts. The only reason to use Blackshirts was if one intended to run as harsh an occupation as possible, one where atrocities would not only be committed, but actively encouraged. It boded ill for Jackson's Folly.

"Don't worry, sir," Frandsen said. "We talked about it once the mutiny was underway and we made up our minds. Fighting the Blackshirts might just allow us to regain some of our honour."

Colin nodded. "Thank you," he said. According to the schedule, there were only two days left before the superdreadnaughts arrived. And then… they would either take the ships or lose. And it would be completely out of his hands. He would just be an observer while the Marines took the ships. "Good luck, Colonel."

Chapter Four

Commodore Stacy Roosevelt, the Commanding Officer of the 123rd Superdreadnaught Squadron, was almost as young as she looked. At thirty-one years old, she looked nineteen, with long blonde hair, a heart-shaped face and a smile that seemed to light up her face — when she cared to show it. Her connections within the Thousand Families — she belonged to the main branch of the Roosevelt Family — were second to none in the Imperial Navy. Although Admiral Percival was her nominal superior, in practice it tended to be the other way around. Percival, a Roosevelt client, bowed and scraped to Stacy. He had certainly assisted her in becoming a Commodore at such an absurdly young age.

Flag Captain Jeremy Damiani kept his face under tight control as Stacy ranted at him. She certainly wasn't smiling for her subordinate, the older man who had been assigned to assist her in carrying out her responsibilities. There were times when Jeremy wondered if it was all worth it — her patronage could take him far, but being in close proximity to her was unbearable — but there was little choice. If he abandoned his patron, she would ensure that he would have nowhere else to go; certainly, no one would back him in a tussle with the entire Roosevelt Family. It would have been a great deal more bearable if Stacy had possessed the knowledge and training of a first-year cadet, but as it was, he was certain that the only way she had passed through the Academy was through family connections.

It didn't help that Stacy had been placed in command of the Roosevelt Family's planned expansion into the Rim, once they had secured control of Jackson's Folly. The senior members of her family, people who intimidated even Stacy herself, had been very insistent that everything should go according to plan. Stacy had, accordingly, taken control and instructed Captain-Commodore Howell to refrain from doing anything until she arrived with her superdreadnaughts, but the Roosevelt Family wasn't the only one involved with the sector. It wasn't hard to come up with possible scenarios for disaster — and, even for Stacy, failure would mean heavy punishment. She would probably find herself exiled to run a mining station somewhere thousands of light years from Earth, the heart of the Empire.

"We are running late," Stacy repeated. Her face, the best that money could buy, was colouring with rage and stress. Jeremy was silently grateful that they were in her stateroom, rather than on the bridge. Being screamed at in front of his crew could only reduce his command authority, what little there was of it. Like most incompetent officers, Stacy was a micromanager, without the wit to know that it

would be better to allow the more experienced crewmen their heads. "Why are we running late?"

Jeremy kept his own face blank. There was no point in shouting back at her, not when a word from her could ruin his career. He wouldn't have put it past her to ruin his career out of spite anyway, but at least he had to try. Besides, he did have a certain degree of loyalty to the Imperial Navy and he didn't want to think about what Stacy would do without someone watching over her shoulder. It was highly unlikely that she would order a flicker jump right into an asteroid field that would destroy the squadron, yet he wanted to be careful. The Empire could not afford to lose any superdreadnaughts.

"We needed to swap out some replacement components on the drive," he reminded her, calmly. After that, they'd made good time — indeed, they were one jump away from Jackson's Folly — but Stacy wasn't interested. Never mind that leaving the drive motivator in place might have resulted in the drives failing at an inconvenient time. "We will be there in one hour, Commodore."

"I want you to find the person responsible for this delay through gross incompetence and have them removed from their post," Stacy ordered. Jeremy nodded. The chances were good that no one was responsible, at least not in the sense that they'd done it on purpose. Drive motivators, exposed to the weird energies of the flicker drive, tended to fail more often than any other component, even after years of research. The superdreadnaughts tended to swap out almost every component on the ship over a five-year period, just to keep the ancient vessels running. "They have delayed our mission."

"Of course, Commodore," Jeremy said, smoothly. Bitter resentment flickered through his mind, only to be forced down and back into the rear of his mind. Scraping and bowing to a noblewoman was humiliating, but it could be a great deal worse. The post on HMS *General Montgomery* was prestigious. It was well worth the hassle. "I shall see to it personally."

He smiled as he tapped the main display, bringing up the star chart. The Observation Squadron had carried out a careful tactical survey of Jackson's Folly and its daughter colonies, preparing for the invasion that everyone knew was inevitable once the Empire realised just what a prize Jackson's Folly actually was. There might have been a handful of Rogue Worlds, where the writ of the Empire didn't run, but they were poor and harmless — and had nothing the Empire wanted. Stacy was meant to draw up the attack plan, yet her mind — which, he had to admit, was good at manipulating the Empire's power structure — was no good at tactical planning. Jeremy had used the time they'd spent in transit working on a fairly basic plan, one where relatively little could go wrong.

"As you can see, Commodore, we will begin by…"

An hour later, he allowed Stacy to precede him onto the bridge. The sight of the main bridge never failed to thrill him, even though the throne-like command chair belonged to Stacy alone. Here, at the nerve centre of the superdreadnaught, the command crew could deal out death and destruction on the Empire's many enemies, while remaining safe from anything the enemies could deal out to them. The five kilometre-long superdreadnaught was one of the most powerful ships in commission, packed with missile tubes, energy weapons and heavy shields. It would take a matching squadron of superdreadnaughts to present the squadron with a real threat and standard military doctrine called for at least two squadrons to break up an enemy squadron. It hardly mattered, of course; the Imperial Navy was the only force permitted to possess superdreadnaughts.

"My Lady Commodore," the helmsman said, as Stacy settled down into her command chair. She looked almost like a child sitting in her father's chair, but her eyes were as alert as ever. Had any of the crew neglected the proper honorific, she would have noticed — and remembered. "We are ready to make the final jump."

Stacy leaned forward, her anger forgotten. "Then by all means," she ordered, "jump!"

Jeremy braced himself as the flicker drive engaged, launching the superdreadnaught across five light years in a split-second. The scientists swore that the transits were not instantaneous — they lasted a certain infinitively-tiny length of time — but it *felt* instantaneous. It also felt, just for a second, as if his insides had been turned upside down. It was a gentle transit, yet it was something that no one ever got used to feeling. He'd been on ships that had jumped while travelling at high sublight speeds and the crews had ended up vomiting badly on the decks.

"Transit completed," the helmsman said. The display updated rapidly as the gravimetric sensors picked out Jackson's Folly, the primary star and the handful of other planets within the system. IFF beacons began to appear as the passive sensors picked up the freighters moving between planets, although he had to remind himself that a hostile starship could be keeping its emissions to the bare minimum, rendering it nearly undetectable. "The flicker drives are cycling down now."

Jeremy relaxed and settled back into his own chair. The flicker drive might have given mankind the stars, but it had also introduced a whole new degree of tactical problems. It was impossible, even for the Empire's most advanced and powerful ships, to keep the flicker drive spun up and ready to jump out. It would burn out the drive and leave the vessel stranded. What *that* meant, from a tactical point of view,

was that if they ran into trouble, it would take time — at least ten minutes for a superdreadnaught — before the drive could be powered up again and jump them out. They would have to stand and fight until then.

"Get me a direct link to the Observation Squadron," Stacy ordered. Her clear voice echoed in the bridge. "I want to talk directly to Captain Howell."

* * *

"I confirm nine superdreadnaughts and seven heavy transport ships," the tactical officer said. Colin nodded as the icons appeared in the display, further from the planet than he had anticipated. Was it a simple navigational error or something far more sinister? The flicker drive wasn't known for being supremely accurate, certainly not at interstellar distances. "The IFF signals match the 123rd Superdreadnaught Squadron."

"Send them a standard greeting," Colin ordered, as the superdreadnaughts came alive, their tactical sensors scouring space for potential threats. Commodore Roosevelt wasn't even trying to hide, or to conceal what her sensors were doing, although there was no real need for her do either. It wasn't as if there was something in the system that could threaten her. "And then hold the holographic program on standby."

"Aye, sir," the communications officer said. The tension on the bridge rose sharply. They were committed now. "We are picking up a response. Commodore Roosevelt would like to speak to Captain Howell."

She isn't giving him his brevet rank, Colin thought, with a flicker of grim amusement. "Activate the hologram," he ordered. It had taken several weeks of preparation, before the mutiny had been launched, to construct a hologram that would fool basic security checks. He'd tested it against *Shadow's* security systems and it had fooled them, but if Stacy asked a question they couldn't answer… everything would fall apart. "Send her the pre-recorded message."

* * *

"Commodore, welcome to Jackson's Folly," Captain-Commodore Howell said. Jeremy watched impatiently as Howell ran through a series of greetings. He had never served with Howell, but he knew — from Stacy — that he didn't have the initiative to get dressed in the

morning without orders from higher authority, in triplicate. Maybe not the desired kind of person for a major command… unless, of course, one wanted the commander to do nothing, but wait until higher authority arrived. "I'm afraid that there has been an incident."

Stacy sucked in her breath sharply. "We discovered that certain other elements were collaborating with the illegitimate government on Jackson's Folly," Howell continued. "I have ordered those elements arrested and I intend to transfer them to your loyal ships at once. I have also arrested the government of the planet, as per the contingency plan you sent me, and they too will be transferred. Please prepare to take them into custody."

Jeremy blinked at Stacy's savage smile… and then understood. Howell had discovered that the other elements were not rebels or terrorists from beyond the Rim, but others from the Empire — from other Families. If another Family had wanted to derail the Roosevelt Family's expansion into the new sector, it would make sense for them to provide covert assistance to Jackson's Folly. Given time, they might even manage to get their clients onto the Observation Squadron and use the starships to assist the local government. And yet… Howell had detected the plot and arrested the people responsible. Stacy could take them into her custody and use them to embarrass their superiors. They might even be so embarrassed that they would back off and leave the sector to the Roosevelt Family.

"Of course," Stacy said, sweetly. She looked over at Jeremy. "Have some of my household troopers moved to supervise the prisoners as they are unloaded from the shuttles. They are not to come to any harm, but they are not to be allowed a chance to escape."

"Yes, Commodore," Jeremy said, surprised. She sounded almost competent… but then, she'd just been offered a chance to secure her position in the line of succession. The Roosevelt Family would want a new Head one of these days and Stacy almost certainly had her eye on the prize. She would be the most powerful woman in the Empire. "I shall see to it personally."

On the display, nineteen heavy transport shuttles were launched from the Observation Squadron. There were too many of them to land on any one superdreadnaught, Jeremy realised; they would have to be staggered out or spread out over the other superdreadnaughts, presenting him with an interesting logistics challenge. He considered asking Stacy if he could delay their arrival times until he could organise space for them, but he knew her too well. She had no concept of delayed gratification. She would want to have them all under her control as soon as possible.

He keyed his console, authorising the shuttles to dock, scattered out over all nine superdreadnaughts. The Household Troops could

escort the prisoners to their quarters — if they were members of the Thousand Families, they could not be mistreated or Stacy's superiors would disown her — and then secure them until they could be sent home in disgrace. Another feather in Stacy's cap… who knew, perhaps her superiors would be so pleased that she would be promoted away from his superdreadnaught squadron.

"Bring them in as soon as possible," Stacy ordered, tightly. "And then prepare to engage the enemy."

Jeremy nodded. The red icons on the display — the battleships protecting Jackson's Folly — were already moving into a defensive formation. He was privately impressed by their determination — *he* would have considered jumping out and waging a hit-and-run war against the Empire rather than standing in defence of their homeworld — but it wouldn't matter. They couldn't stand against his superdreadnaughts, even with Stacy in command.

The thought was bitter, yet it had to be faced. Another world was about to be ground under and brought to heel… and there was nothing he could do, but watch.

* * *

"The shuttles are away, sir."

Colin nodded, watching as the icons accelerated towards their target ships. Preparing the holographic message had been a gamble, even though they'd discovered Commodore Roosevelt's secret orders to Captain-Commodore Howell. If she'd insisted on the shuttles all going to one superdreadnaught, the Marines would have to have used the emergency plan and if that had failed… they would have died, followed rapidly by the Observation Squadron itself. He wished, desperately, that he was flying with the Marines. It was the first time he had sent men into danger, where some or all of them might be killed, without being with them.

He sat back and tried to remain calm. It was tempting to spin up the drives, just so they could flicker out and escape if everything went to hell, but that would risk alerting the enemy ships. If they realised that the Observation Squadron wasn't behaving normally, what would they think? Would they think that Howell was just being careful, or would they realise that something was very wrong? No; they had to sit still, knowing that if the raiders were detected ahead of time, they were committed to a missile duel with nine superdreadnaughts. It was a battle that would only have one outcome.

"Good," he said. There wouldn't even be any live feed from the shuttles. "Hold our position and stand by."

There was nothing else he could do, but wait.

* * *

The great advantage of the Marine Goblin-class assault shuttle, as far as Colonel Neil Frandsen was concerned, was that it could pass for a Cloud-class heavy transport shuttle, even at close range. Its weapons were mounted on recessed platforms, allowing them to be concealed from suspicious eyes until it was far too late, while it could carry thirty armoured Marines into the heart of the enemy position. In this case, Neil knew, three shuttles were going to land on the *General Montgomery*.

He studied his HUD as he ran through the final checks of his armour and weapons. Commander — no, *Captain* now — Walker had been keen to avoid heavy casualties if possible, but Neil knew that it was quite possible that they would lose the entire team along with the superdreadnaught. It didn't matter so much to him. After he'd been effectively cashiered for refusing orders to slaughter helpless captives, his life had been meaningless. Colin Walker had offered him a chance for redemption, both for himself and the Marine Corps. It said a great deal about how dissatisfaction that spread through the ranks that only a handful of his regiment had refused to join the rebellion.

"Ten seconds, sir," the pilot said. The looming bulk of the superdreadnaught was growing rapidly through the forward portal. Neil activated his implant and linked into the shuttle's sensors, checking out their target shuttlebay. There would be a welcoming committee for the high-value prisoners they were supposed to be carrying, but they would be lightly armed and properly unarmoured. The prisoners were supposed to be helpless, after all. "Nine… eight… seven…"

Neil felt a combat trance falling over him as the shuttle entered the shuttlebay, passing through the forcefield that kept the air within the bay. The shuttle's sensors revealed a small group of armed men wearing the crimson colours of the Roosevelt Family, marking them out as Household Troops. His smile widened. Household Troops were good at looking pretty, but few of them had any real experience of actual fighting on the battlefield. They would be no match for his men.

"Weapons ready, sir," the pilot said.

Neil nodded. The other advantage of the Goblin's design was that all of the Marines could be ejected swiftly from the ship, making it impossible for the enemy to bottle them up inside and trap them — or eject the shuttle back into space.

“Fire,” he ordered.

Chapter Five

Lieutenant Wagner watched as the three shuttles slowly lowered themselves onto the deck, their sleek forms obscured by the shimmering drive fields propelling them through space. He was rather surprised that the pilots had chosen to fly right into the shuttlebay, rather than use the starship's tractor beams to land slowly and precisely, but Lady Roosevelt had ordered that they land as quickly as possible. Wagner had served the Roosevelt Family long enough to know that what Lady Roosevelt wanted, Lady Roosevelt got, at least as long as her subordinates wanted to keep their cushy jobs. The Household Troops knew better than to object. They could always be transferred to the Imperial Army and sent to serve on some godforsaken muddy ball at the edge of the Empire, where the only recreation was banging inbred girls and shooting pigeons.

The drive fields shimmered away to almost nothing and Wagner blinked in surprise. The shuttle seemed to be opening its hatches… no, it was opening shields protecting heavy weapons! For a second, he was frozen in place as the weapons revealed themselves, and then training took over and his hand raced towards the emergency button. It was too late. The heavy plasma cannons mounted on the Marine shuttle opened fire and Wagner's body was vaporised, along with the men under his command. The Marines had taken the shuttlebay in the first second of the boarding mission.

* * *

Neil braced himself as he was catapulted out of the shuttle, his armour automatically compensating for the motion and bringing him down towards the deck. His HUD updated rapidly as the suit's sensors started to monitor the ship's internal status, noting the by-products of heavy plasma weapons being fired and the sudden dearth of any armed resistance. The charred bodies that were all that remained of the Household Troops could be safely ignored, so Neil led the first platoon in a charge towards the shuttlebay control compartment, where a uniformed crewman was staring at the Marines as if they were demons from hell. Even if he had reacted at once, it was already too late to seal the ship and vent the shuttlebay into space; the deployed Marines were already flowing into the ship. The plasma fire had disabled the inner hatches.

He crashed through the window and came down inside the control compartment. The crewman was still stunned, but Neil shot

him anyway, using the stunner to render him unconscious. The man would be out of it for an hour, by which time the boarding action would have succeeded — or failed. He checked the updates from the other Marines as they flowed into the nearby compartments, stunning everyone they encountered. The great beauty of the stunners, at least in his opinion, was that they could — quite literally — shoot first and ask questions later. He triggered a specific command in his suit and extended a data line into the computers, accessing the shuttlebay's primary monitoring system. If the superdreadnaught's security team was on the ball, they should already be trying to lock the Marines out, seal off the entire section and trap the Marines until they could assemble the force to take them out. The feedback started at once, confirming his fears.

"Deal with it," he ordered. One of the Marines — a communications tech — squatted down beside him and used her own suit to access the systems, overriding the main security codes and isolating the shuttlebay's control systems. Neil had wondered if they would be able to take control of the entire datanet from the shuttlebay, but — not entirely to his surprise — the system was hard-isolated from the datanet. The Empire was understandably paranoid about computer security. "See if you can get me a live feed from the cameras."

"The main system has been secured," the tech said, slowly. Her voice was thoughtful. Like every Marine, she was a combatant first and a tech second, but she tended to resent her position. No Marine was expendable, yet she was less expendable than most, purely because of her advanced training. "The ship's security system isn't linked into this system."

Neil nodded. It had been worth a try, even though he hadn't expected success. "12th Platoon stays here and guards the shuttles," he ordered. They'd planned the mission out in advance, but there was always room for improvising — after all, no battle plan survived contact with the enemy. "The rest of us will move to our assigned targets."

He led the fire team out of the shuttlebay and headed down towards the hatch connecting the shuttlebay compartment to the rest of the ship. It would be easy to get lost inside the massive superdreadnaught, but his HUD constantly projected a map in front of his eyes. The hatch itself was computer-locked, yet — for safety reasons — it was actually quite easy to open it unless the inner system had been fused. It wouldn't have mattered even if they had fused the inner systems; Neil would have brought up one of the heavy plasma cannons and blasted his way through the hatch. No one, not even the most paranoid designer, would put warship-grade armour on the *inside*

of a starship.

The hatch chugged open and he smiled as he saw the assembled security team on the other side. The Blackshirts were clearly unprepared to come face-to-face with armed Marines; at a guess, they'd been scattered through the ship when the Marines had landed inside their shuttlebay and their commander was still trying to coordinate a response. The Blackshirts had no time to react before the Marines scythed them down and kept moving. The massive superdreadnaught might have an equally massive crew, but few of them would be armed. The Marines could, he hoped, secure the vital compartments… and then the crew would have the choice between surrendering or dying when the air was pumped out of their quarters.

* * *

On the bridge, Jeremy was watching helplessly as disaster started to unfold. The first warning they'd had was when the security sensors lit up when the plasma cannons fired, by which time it was too late to fire on the shuttles and destroy them. The armoured intruders — they were wearing Marine armour, although that didn't prove that they *were* Marines — were already spreading through the ship and taking out the security sensors as they moved. Three entire compartments were already completely black, with no way of knowing what was happening inside. The handful of security personnel they'd encountered had simply been brushed aside.

He looked up at Stacy, who was staring at the screen. "Do something," she ordered, hysterically. Jeremy could almost sympathise with her position. It had been *her* orders that had allowed the intruders to board all nine superdreadnaughts, *her* orders that had exposed the entire squadron to boarding missions. Even if they rallied and defeated the intruders, it would still look very bad on her record, although he was sure she would find a way to pass the blame to someone else. "Do something!"

Jeremy considered and then started to redeploy the security teams towards the intruders. There had been no warning, so there had been no internal security alert and the counter-boarding parties had to make their way to the armoury first, just to arm themselves. The intruders, who clearly knew their way around a superdreadnaught, would also be heading to the armoury, where they could cut off all hope of a successful defence. Even the dreaded security troops — the Blackshirts — were not permitted weapons onboard, unless they were on duty. He glanced down at the link to the transports, wondering if it would be wise to order them to start unloading their troops from the

stasis units and prepare to transfer them to the superdreadnaughts. It was against regulations, but he couldn't think of any other way to resist.

"Yes, Commodore," he said. Keying his console, he started to contact the various transports. At least the Observation Squadron hadn't opened fire on them, although he suspected that that would just a matter of time. The transports might have been larger than superdreadnaughts, but they didn't have the defences or weapons protecting the most powerful weapons in the Empire's arsenal. "I will redeploy troops from the transports and have them brought over here."

He glanced down at the internal security monitors. Several more compartments had gone black, with brief reports of weapons fire and intruders before they went silent. The intruders were definitely heading towards the most vital parts of the ship, including the armoury, engineering… and the flag bridge. It was funny how the best-protected sections were also, in some ways, the most vulnerable. He caught himself glancing over towards the hatch sealing the bridge off from the rest of the ship. How long would it last against fire from a heavy plasma cannon?

Another compartment went black and he swore. "I think we also need to evacuate this compartment," he added. He'd sealed the compartments, but the intruders weren't slowing down at all. "We may be at risk."

"Impossible," Stacy said, flatly. Her eyes were wide with panic and stubborn determination, unwilling to abandon her bridge. He swallowed several words that came to mind. There was a point when one just had to abandon an untenable position and move elsewhere, or die in place, for nothing. They had reached that point, but Stacy — used to seeing the universe bend to her will — hadn't realised it. "We must not abandon the bridge."

* * *

The ambush had been hastily organised, but that hadn't stopped it taking out two Marines and seriously injuring a third. Neil ordered a quick fallback to safer positions, where the Marines threw grenades into the compartment to destroy the plasma cannon the Blackshirts had used to ambush them. The resulting explosion shattered the compartment — superheated plasma burned through almost everything it touched — and left the Blackshirts in no position to fire. The only survivor ran screaming towards the Marines, his entire body ablaze. He was clearly beyond help, so Neil punched him in the face

and shattered his skull. It was the only thing he could do for the dying man. The Marines advanced more carefully, pressing through the compartments one by one, watching for a second ambush. They were approaching the armoury.

Neil stood aside as they opened the final hatch, one heavy enough to resist even plasma fire for several minutes. The Blackshirts were desperately trying to distribute weapons and armour, but it was too late. The Marines cut through the unarmoured Blackshirts with stunners, saving the heavier weapons for the armoured enemy soldiers, who either tried to fight or surrender. Neil was unimpressed by their conduct. The Blackshirts were used to being nothing more than a cudgel, used by their masters to crush resistance with the liberal application of heavy weapons; the Marines were a precision force. They were unused to heavy resistance, let alone something attacking them in the heart of a starship. It was beyond him why Commodore Roosevelt had chosen to use them as an internal security force, unless she felt that the Marines could not be trusted.

His lips twitched as he detailed a platoon to secure the armoury and ensure that no newcomers could claim weapons and use them against his team. It was quite possible that most of the crew would join the rebels once they realised what had happened, but for the moment he had to be careful. If there had been no less than seventy intelligence agents on the Observation Squadron, there could be far more on the superdreadnaughts, ships the Empire didn't dare lose. He checked with the communications tech, who was using the main security terminal in the armoury to access the main system and smiled. Suddenly, the Marines had access to their enemy's security sensors.

He detailed several platoons to seal all the approaches and then checked in on the platoon approaching engineering. The heavy armour surrounding the starship's flicker drive was impeding their advance, but they'd be in the main compartment within twenty minutes at the most, unless the enemy had prepared a nasty surprise for them inside. He checked their own sensors and allowed himself a nasty grin. The engineering crew were clearly unable to put up a defence, leaving it solely in the hands of the Blackshirts. Once they were gone, there would be nothing stopping the Marines from taking engineering — and, with it, control of the ship.

"With me," he ordered, and led the final platoons towards the bridge. There were no internal monitors in the bridge itself, but he checked all around the bridge and saw only a handful of Blackshirts, preparing to give their lives in defence of their superior. He wondered, briefly, if Commodore Roosevelt would have the nerve to hit the self-destruct and destroy the ship, before putting the thought out of his

mind. There was nothing he could do about it.

The faces of the hostages from the asteroid he'd invaded, the ones he had refused to kill, drifted in front of his mind. Whatever happened, perhaps he was now on the road to redemption.

* * *

"Commodore," Jeremy said, "they have secured control of the internal security systems."

Stacy barely looked at him. She had been throwing a tantrum for the last few minutes, one that the bridge crew had been trying to ignore, even though she was cursing them all as incompetents and fools who had allowed her ship to be boarded. Her slight form was shaking with rage; she'd already threatened to have the entire crew transferred to a penal world, hardly something to fill their minds with confidence and determination. If the bridge crew had been armed, he wouldn't have been surprised if one of them had shot her in the head. He wasn't sure that he would have blamed the murderer either.

"The ship is no longer secure," Jeremy pushed. "We have to move out of this compartment and evacuate."

"And go where?" Stacy asked. Her voice came in great gasps, a mark of her fear and growing panic. She ought to be using her command codes to purge the superdreadnaught's databases, or even trigger the self-destruct, but she was too scared to think clearly. And, without her command codes, no one else on the squadron could render the ships useless. "Where can we go?"

Jeremy looked down at the main display. The transports were still decanting their troops, but it was clear to him that they would be too late. By the time they had their troops loaded into shuttles and dispatched to the superdreadnaughts, they would be in enemy hands. Even so, if he could get Stacy to a shuttle, he could get her to one of the transports and they could escape…

A treacherous thought floated through his mind. Did he *have* to get Stacy to a shuttle? The thought of abandoning her on the superdreadnaught was tempting, all the more so because his career was over anyway. The Imperial Navy would court-martial him for gross incompetence and the fact that it had been Stacy, not him, who had issued the orders wouldn't cut any ice with them at all. And that was if he was lucky. If he was unlucky, Stacy's family would ensure that the rest of his life would be on a penal world; nasty, brutish and short.

And, even if he saved her life, he didn't think that she would be grateful.

“We can go to the transports,” he said, taking a second look at the display. The Observation Squadron, whatever had happened to it, had retreated out of firing range, preventing the superdreadnaughts from destroying their tormentors before it was too late. “They’re already spinning up their drives and preparing to flicker out. We can get onboard, flee this system and return with reinforcements.”

Stacy looked up at him. It took him a second to realise that, under the bluster, she was absolutely terrified. She was so scared that she was barely able to move, clinging onto the command chair as if it was the only security in an uncertain world. Sweat streaked her face as she looked away, ashamed of her own weakness.

“And then…?” She asked, so quietly that he could barely hear her. “What happens then?”

Jeremy opened his mouth to reply, but the bridge darkened suddenly, confirming that the engineering compartment had fallen to the intruders. He checked his terminal and swore as he realised that power — and control — was being rerouted, leaving the bridge operating on emergency power only. The background hum of the drive, so ever-present that he had long ago grown used to feeling it in his bones, started to ebb away. His ship was dying.

“We need to move,” he snapped. He reached for her arm and pulled her out of the command chair, even though he had never dared to touch her before. “Come on…”

A dull thump echoed outside the main hatch and Stacy froze. The intruders were right outside. Jeremy looked up, towards the access hatch to the internal tubes, which would allow them a second means of escape… if Stacy had the presence of mind to use it. It was too late. Before he could say, or do, anything, the communications officer touched the emergency release and the hatch jumped open. Four armoured figures strode into the compartment, weapons primed and ready.

“I’ll give you anything,” Stacy said. Jeremy realised in a sudden burst of amusement that she was pleading with their captors. “I can give you money or power or anything you want, just let me go unharmed and I will give you anything and…”

The armoured figure stunned her, leaving her body to fall against Jeremy and then crash to the deck. A moment later, Jeremy was stunned too. His last thought was of home… and of a family he hadn’t seen in years, ever since he had joined the Imperial Navy.

* * *

Neil looked down at Commodore Roosevelt and shook his head,

not bothering to conceal his disgust. The girl — and she was almost as young as she looked, he knew — had failed in her duty, even her duty to her Family. She was very lucky that she hadn't been captured by pirates. The last member of the Thousand Families to be captured by pirates had been bled dry and then executed when she could give them no more.

He checked the Marine datanet and smiled. All nine superdreadnaughts had been taken, although not without casualties. The mission had been a complete success.

Colin will be pleased, he thought, with wry amusement. *And now the rebellion can begin*.

Chapter Six

Colin knew that it was wrong of him, but he couldn't resist, even though it might have consequences further down the line. Having taken over Howell's office for himself, he had Stacy Roosevelt dragged before him in chains. It had been ten years since he had seen her in person and he was astonished at the change in her, her natural — and inbred — arrogance warring with her fear. Her eyes went very wide when she saw him, although he wasn't sure if she recognised him from when he'd worked for Admiral Percival or if she had been briefed on him when she'd been assigned to Jackson's Folly. The fear in her eyes was gratifying and Colin wallowed in it for longer than he should, before he straightened up and studied her thoughtfully.

The Marine Colonel had been right, Colin knew; Stacy Roosevelt *was* very lucky not to have been captured by pirates, or someone who had a grudge against her personally and no sense of restraint. Colin could have killed her with his bare hands, or thrown her into open space, or performed unspeakable abominations on her body — all things that had happened to others, on her command. There was a certain temptation, he had to admit, but he knew that giving into that temptation would make him no better than the Empire. Besides, he didn't even have the excuse of interrogating her, for Stacy had sung like a canary. She had unlocked all of her secret files and surrendered her credit codes and other details. Colin considered, in the privacy of his own head, that this new Stacy was far more tolerable than the old version.

And she had no friends here. Almost all of her crew — almost all of the superdreadnaught crewmen — had volunteered to join the rebellion when they had been told what was going on. The Blackshirts had been making themselves unpopular on the superdreadnaughts and even hardened Empire loyalists hadn't been quite so loyal. Colin had scattered the crews over the superdreadnaughts, and even over the former Observation Squadron, just to make it harder for any undiscovered agent, but he was fairly certain that most of the crew would be loyal. The command crews, at least, had too much experience of Stacy Roosevelt. Even her Flag Captain had volunteered to join the rebellion.

"Good morning, My Lady," Colin said, mockingly. The years seemed to fade away and he remembered being younger, sitting in Admiral Percival's quarters and hearing her contempt and distaste for the common-born Lieutenant. It should have warned him, yet even though his ears had burned with humiliation and determination to prove himself, he hadn't realised how reluctant Percival had been to

confront her. She might have been his subordinate, but which one of them was truly the patron? "I trust that you had a pleasant sleep?"

Stacy stared at him. He had wondered if she was going to give him one of her famous tantrums, but she seemed to have more self-control than that. Or perhaps she was just stunned. Her entire universe had turned upside down.

"I could have killed you," Colin continued. "God knows I *wanted* to kill you, for everything you've done over the years. I spared your life for one reason and one reason only. I want you to take a message back to Admiral Percival at Camelot."

"I can't go back," Stacy said. Her voice was raw, as if she'd been crying. Colin had left her in the care of a pair of armoured Marines, who had orders to keep an eye on her, but not to offer her any help unless she asked for it. He hadn't asked for a report on what she'd done since she'd recovered from the stun bolt. "My family…"

Colin felt no pity, even though she looked young and innocent. She had used the power of the Roosevelt Family to get whatever she wanted from life, be it a genetically-engineered boy-toy or command of an entire superdreadnaught squadron. Now that power would turn on her… although he doubted that they would kill her, or disinherit her. It wouldn't do for the commoners to see the Thousand Families turning on one of their number. It might give them ideas.

"The alternative is worse, trust me on that," Colin said, dryly. "You can't stay here. If you refuse to go back and give them my message, you will be sold into slavery somewhere along the Rim. We'll remove your indent and anything you could use to prove that you are who you are, leaving you trapped forever. Do you still want to stay?"

Stacy shook her head with an audible gulp. "No," she said. "Please…"

"The message will be on a datachip for Admiral Percival's eyes only," Colin continued. He was tempted to insist that she called him *sir*, but that would have only been a distraction. "You and the loyalists will be sent back on a transport ship. Once you arrive, the ship's controls will be unlocked and you will be able to steer her into dock. You can give him the message and then… do whatever the hell you want."

He looked up at the Marines. "Take her to the transport," he said, tightly. Stacy's eyes widened as she realised that she was being dismissed. "Put her onboard with the others…"

"Wait," Stacy said, desperately. "I can give you anything you want…"

"I'm afraid that it's too late for that," Colin said. Quite apart from the fact that over two hundred thousand people were now depending on him to keep them alive and free, there was no way he could trust

her. She would betray him as soon as she could and laugh afterwards, once she was safety back with her family. “Goodbye, Stacy; God grant we will never meet again.”

He watched the Marines drag her out and then keyed his wristcom, issuing orders for the prisoner transfer. Stacy might have failed to bribe him, but she could offer everything, up to and including a whole planet, and someone less responsible might be tempted. Anderson would see to it that she was sedated until the transport pulled out of orbit and flickered back towards Camelot. She could wake up then for the trip. She’d hate spending the time in close quarters, with hundreds of commoners for company, but it wouldn’t kill her.

Colin shook his head and turned back to the near-orbit display. The nine captured superdreadnaughts hung together, work crews scrambling to outfit them with external racks and load the racks with missiles. By Colin’s most conservative estimate, they had at least two more days before they had to depart in order to make the rendezvous with the Annual Fleet, but they’d need the time to shake down the crews and get back up into fighting trim. They’d moved too many crewmen around the fleet for them all to fall together without heavy drilling.

A handful of other icons remained dark red, mocking him. The heavy troop transports, loaded with enough Blackshirts to conquer and occupy an entire planet — at least if backed up by orbital fire, as the Marines had pointed out — represented a major problem. Colin had ordered the Blackshirts back into stasis, where they could wait until the heat death of the universe if necessary, but he had no idea what he could do with them. He didn’t want to commit mass slaughter by opening the ships to space and suffocating the soldiers, yet he didn’t want to return them to Admiral Percival or keep them prisoner himself. Where could he put them all? It would be easy to leave them on the ships, but then he wouldn’t have the ships for later use himself.

He glanced up as the door chimes rang and keyed the switch. The hatch hissed open to reveal Daria, with Mariko following right behind her. Colin got to his feet and held out his hand, but Daria surprised him with a hug, throwing her arms around him and holding him tightly. Mariko, as always, was more dignified, but Colin was sure that he saw a glint of amusement in her eyes.

“You did it,” Daria said, without letting go of him. “You actually did it!”

“I did,” Colin said, gently disentangling himself from her arms. It had been a long time since he had been held by anyone, but he didn’t have the time to think of a woman. He hadn’t even patronised the brothels down on the planet below. “Nine superdreadnaughts… a

force that will make even Admiral Percival sit up and take notice."

Daria frowned as she threw herself into one of the seats. "And how long will it be until he gets reinforcements?"

Colin shrugged. "If I know Percival," he said, "it will be a long time before he even *asks* for reinforcements. The Imperial Navy wouldn't look kindly on him for losing the ships in the first place and if he needed to ask for help… well, it would look very bad on his record. Even if he receives no formal punishment for his stupidity, his career will be frozen, unable to progress any further. His patrons will desert him and his clients will start heading away."

He grinned. "And even if they do send him reinforcements, it will take them time to send additional superdreadnaughts into the sector, and even then it will be hard for them to find us, let alone bring us to battle," he added. He nodded towards the star chart, which was displaying an expanding sphere where his fleet could be, a sphere already over fifty light years in diameter. The entire Imperial Navy could hide within that region of space and be completely undetectable. "As long as we don't get careless…"

"And I'm sure that carelessness is not a trait one would apply to you," Daria agreed, dryly. "I'll start making the preparations with the Geeks and Nerds."

Colin nodded. It had taken several years to build up the contacts with the various hidden colonies and organisations beyond the Rim, a task that would have been impossible without Daria and the Freebooter League. The Empire had literally billions of enemies, but without a focus they had been unable to pose more than a minor threat at best, one that could be safely ignored by the Thousand Families. He looked up at the superdreadnaughts and smiled. There was no way they could ignore *that* threat, once Admiral Percival deigned to tell them that it existed, and combined with the Annual Fleet… well!

"You go there and get them ready to receive us," Colin said. "We'll take the fleet and come meet you at the rendezvous point."

He turned back to the display. "One additional point," he added. "Do you know what we can do with five hundred thousand prisoners? We have to put the Blackshirts somewhere."

Daria considered it. "Kill them all and the universe would smell a little better," she said, darkly. "There isn't a single person along the Rim who would condemn you for killing them, not even slightly."

"I don't want to start with a mass slaughter," Colin explained. "We're going to have to start accepting surrenders and that won't be easy if they think they're just going to be killed out of hand."

"They'll probably wind up thinking that anyway," Daria pointed out. "Public Information will turn you into a mass murderer without

any bother at all. They'll start claiming that you have slaughtered the entire crew and replaced them with pirates drawn from a Rogue World — or Jackson's Folly itself."

Colin winced. Even though he had been careful to operate alone, without drawing any help — officially or unofficially — from Jackson's Folly, it was true that the Empire would probably seize on his mutiny and rebellion as an excuse to clamp down on the planet. He felt guilty over that, even though he knew that there had been no choice — and besides, he'd read Stacy Roosevelt's secret orders. The planet was going to be brutally subjected and brought under Imperial rule, which meant the direct rule of the Roosevelt Family. The entire governing class of the planet, it seemed, had been marked for death. Stacy had orders to round them up, interrogate them and then either execute them or transfer them to a penal world.

"But if you're determined to avert a slaughter, transfer them to one of the colonies along the Rim," Daria continued, unaware of his inner thoughts. "There are several worlds there that are borderline, with small populations and some interest in seeing that the Empire suffers badly, keeping it away from their worlds. We could just drop them there and leave them to take care of themselves. They'd have a chance to survive and we wouldn't have to worry about what they might be doing in our rear."

Colin smiled. "Good thought," he agreed. If nothing else, perhaps the Blackshirts could do what millions of convicts had been doing since the human race started to expand into space. Having been unwillingly transported to a borderline world, they'd have the choice between making it liveable or dying there. "I'll send the transports back with you and they can be emptied on one of those worlds."

"Of course," Daria agreed. "And then I will set up the meetings with the underground organisations. They will all want a piece of you."

"I know," Colin joked. "That's what I'm worried about."

* * *

The Flag Briefing Room on the *General Montgomery* was massive, easily large enough to hold every Captain in a full task force, perhaps even one of the sector fleets. Colin hadn't set foot in one since Admiral Percival had betrayed him, yet he'd seen several before then and they had all been different. Normally, the Captain of the superdreadnaught was entitled to decorate the ship in whatever style he felt appropriate, but Stacy Roosevelt had taken that entitlement for herself. Her taste, Colin decided, was appallingly bad. Golden artefacts, each one worth

more than even a Captain made in a year, were scattered around, while the bulkheads were painted a strange mixture of gold and silver. Colin had already privately resolved to have it changed as soon as possible, if they ever had the time. Besides, the artworks — although he felt that calling them artworks was being charitable — were worth millions of credits. The rebellion might need funding.

He glanced from face to face as his senior officers rose, greeting him as he entered the room. He'd had to reshuffle his most trusted officers to ensure that each of the superdreadnaughts had a hard core of his personnel onboard — and armed Marines, just in case — and they were all getting used to their new responsibilities. At least, unlike Stacy Roosevelt, Colin believed in frequent drills and proper rewards for good service, ensuring that his crew were already motivated to do their best. Besides, the thought of execution or a permanent exile on a penal world would keep a few minds concentrated on avoiding capture. Given a few days, the superdreadnaughts would be functioning at maximum efficiency. If only they had more time…

"Gentlemen, be seated," he said, as he took his own seat. Commodore Roosevelt had obtained her own chair for the briefing room, one shaped more like a throne than a typical Navy-issue chair, and Colin felt vaguely silly sitting on it. Even so, it was just another thing that would have to be replaced once they had the time. "First, thank you all for your efforts. We are ready to flicker out on schedule."

He smiled at their reactions. There were some senior officers, ones he had known personally, who would have demanded a standing ovation from their subordinates, but none of them would have clapped and cheered for him — not that he wanted such treatment, anyway. He needed his subordinates to be open and honest with him, not for them to start dressing up defeat as victory. The thought made his smile grow wider. Public Information, for all of its skill at controlling the media, would have some problems convincing the population that losing nine superdreadnaughts to a mutiny was a victory.

"If we make it to the Annual Fleet's waypoint ahead of time, we will use the position to conduct additional drills until we can operate as a unit," he continued. The superdreadnaught crews hadn't been drilled properly under Commodore Roosevelt, although some of the brighter Captains had drilled their crews as if they were operating alone, without the rest of the squadron. "If not, we will need to engage at once or abandon our prize. Our operational plan reflects that reality."

"Yes," Khursheda said. She was now one of the superdreadnaught Captains, the vessel's prior Captain having refused to join the revolution. He would be sharing Stacy Roosevelt's living quarters on

her way back to Camelot. “Colin… is it necessary to strike so hard?”

Colin frowned at her expression. He understood her point, of course; it meant that the escorts, including men and women who might join the rebellion, wouldn’t have a chance to surrender. He hated the concept himself, but there was little choice. His small squadron couldn’t afford a battle where there were more than a handful of variables. God alone knew how quickly the convoy escorts would respond.

And, worse, they would be alarmingly close to Camelot itself.

“I think that we don’t have a choice,” he said, grimly. “If we fail to take the Annual Fleet intact, we may be unable to press our advantage and destabilise the entire sector. And that, my friends, dooms us to inevitable defeat.”

There was no further argument. Few of them were happy with it, but they were all professional naval officers and understood the realities of combat in deep space. They couldn’t afford to lose their first battle, or the rebellion would collapse before it had even begun. And that, they knew, would doom any hope of freedom from the Empire.

Two hours later, the combined fleet flickered out towards its first destination.

Chapter Seven

"Commodore, *Markus Twain* reports that she is finally ready to jump," Lieutenant Cohen reported. "All ships have now reported ready."

"Finally," Commodore Sonja Warren said, not bothering to hide her irritation. "Helm; begin jump preparation. I want to jump to the next waypoint before someone else goes wrong."

"Aye, Commodore," the helmswoman said. "Jump preparation begun; jump in two minutes precisely."

Sonja scowled down at her hands, reminding herself not to snap at her crew. The assignment to escort the Annual Fleet to Sector 117 — and command of over thirty starships, the largest formation outside the Sector Fleets — was a indication of how much trust the Admiralty had in her abilities, but it was one of the most tedious assignments in the Imperial Navy. It was quite possible for a battlecruiser like *Pegasus* to make the trip from Earth to the Rim in under six months, yet escorting fifty bulk freighters ensured that the trip would stretch out to nearly nine months. The freighters were old, had far less precise drives and simply took longer to recharge before they flickered onwards to their next waypoint. It didn't help that, in order to ensure security, they had orders not to go within a light year of an inhabited system. Her crew were tired and needed shore leave, but there was no chance of that until they set foot on Camelot.

She relaxed slightly at the thought. The next jump would take them to within two light years of Camelot, then there would be one final jump and they would be home free. Admiral Percival's Sector Fleet could take over escort duties for the individual ships as they were scattered to the various inhabited worlds in the sector, allowing her crews — and Sonja herself — to have a well-earned rest. She had no idea what the shore leave facilities were like on Camelot, but she would have been happy just to go off duty for a few weeks and spend it all in bed, alone. It would be so lovely to have some guaranteed peace and quiet.

"Attention all ships," the helmswoman said. "Jump in one minute and counting. Slave navigational computers to *Pegasus*: I say again, slave navigational computers to *Pegasus*."

Sonja kept her face expressionless, even though she wanted to roll her eyes. For some reason best known to themselves, the Admiralty had insisted on concealing the waypoint coordinates from the freighter crews, even though they'd shared them with Admiral Percival and his command staff. The Annual Fleet might be the most desirable target for pirates — or the independent black colonies along

the Rim — in the entire sector, but no pirate fleet could hope to rally the firepower to defeat the convoy's escorts. Hell, she would have been delighted if they had tried. Blowing pirate ships into flaming debris would have broken the monotony.

The Empire was more than a little paranoid when it came to industrial nodes and stations, to the point where all of the standard Imperial-approved designs were firmly controlled by one or more of the Thousand Families and their corporate interests. Sector 117 needed an industrial base of its own, one that could support an expansion in the sector's economy, yet the population would never be allowed to build one of their own. Instead, at great expense, they had been forced to import the industrial nodes from factories closer to Earth, keeping them dependent upon the Empire. Sonja didn't know for sure, but she would have bet half her salary that Imperial Intelligence had added in a handful of their own components, ensuring that the Empire knew what had been built in the nodes — and when. It didn't really matter in this case, at least. She knew that the freighters would eventually be unloaded at worlds that were already firmly under the Empire's thumb. The Roosevelt Family had seen to that.

She checked the live feed from the display as the seconds ticked away and the freighters slaved themselves to the command ship. She doubted that any of their commanders were happy about it — she wouldn't have wanted to slave her ship to any other ship, whatever the reason behind it — but they couldn't argue. They came from the Family-owned shipping lines and would know better than to rock the boat too much. It would have serious career repercussions. No merchant career, no matter how illustrious, could survive a complaint from the Imperial Navy.

"Thirty seconds to jump," the helmswoman said. She looked absurdly young for her position — or perhaps that was because Sonja herself felt old and tired. There were only two more jumps, she reminded herself, and then they would be safe and sound. "Twenty-nine, twenty-eight, twenty-seven…"

Sonja caught sight of her own reflection in the display and smiled to herself. Unlike many other well-connected commanding officers, she hadn't bothered to design her own uniform, or even decorate her flagship in whatever style she chose. She wore the basic blue of the Imperial Navy, contrasting oddly with her short black hair and sharp face. She realised that she looked tired and promised herself at least four hours of sleep once the coming jump was completed. Her XO could handle the pause while the freighters recharged their flicker drives and braced themselves for the final jump. Or perhaps she just wouldn't have the time. Her ship's doctor had been nagging at her

about her physical exam, the one she'd been dodging for the last year or so. Sonja hated being poked and prodded — she suspected that the doctor made it uncomfortable on purpose — but regulations were clear. Every crewman, even the starship's commander, had to undergo a complete physical exam every five years. Her time was definitely running out.

The thought made her smile grew wider. She had played the great game of patronage carefully, trading patrons when necessary, until she had finally reached the command she sought. The Imperial Navy had been good to her and she would serve it loyally for as long as she could, yet even the greatest of connections couldn't save her from the physical examination. Even the Imperial Navy, a patronage-riddled entity, drew the line there. A commander who might collapse while on duty was a danger to everyone, including herself.

"…Three, two, one," the helmswoman said. "Jump!"

The Annual Fleet flickered out towards its next waypoint.

* * *

Colin sat in the sinfully comfortable command chair on the bridge of the *General Montgomery*, silently swearing to himself that he would have the chair pulled out and replaced with a properly uncomfortable one as soon as he had the time. He didn't understand how the various commanders of the superdreadnaught had avoided falling asleep while on duty, although in Stacy Roosevelt's case her falling asleep on the bridge could only have improved efficiency. Her Flag Captain has probably been relieved to hear snores coming from her command chair.

He shook his head and stared down at the datapad in his hand, flicking through the files on the superdreadnaught's crew. He hadn't been surprised to discover that the Thousand Families kept their own files on their clients, although he had been surprised to discover that they routinely shared them. Or maybe it was just between patrons; Stacy Roosevelt had access to most of Admiral Percival's files, including Colin's own. He had read it with a certain amount of amusement, and private relief that Stacy was out of reach. Percival had pulled no punches; Colin had been damned as overly ambitious, which was true enough, but also for having desires far above his station. Percival, in what he had doubtless considered the greatest of wit, had written about the common-born officer with ambitions to rise to the very top and join the aristocracy. Percival's final comment — that Colin should spend the rest of his life on an isolated patrol base — would probably come back to haunt him. Colin doubted that

even his connections could save him from nemesis.

The next file related to a crewwoman who had refused a superior's advances and ended with the suggestion that she should never see promotion again, at least until she changed her mind and opened her legs for her superior. Colin shook his head in disbelief. He had always known that he had a vindictive streak — he'd considered doing horrible things to Stacy Roosevelt, purely out of a desire for revenge — but this was far beyond anything *he* had ever considered. Colin was mildly surprised that the crewwoman hadn't been transferred to somewhere unpleasant — a far-off asteroid mining colony, perhaps — yet perhaps her superior's lust had not dimmed. Or perhaps he just hadn't wanted to commit anything to the files. Not all members of the Thousand Families were bastards. The superior's social equals might have had a few things to say about his conduct.

Colin tapped the file, marking it — and the crewwoman — for later attention, and went on to the next file. He'd reasoned that if he read the secure files and noted the crewmen who had bad reports from their superiors, those crewmen would make ideal recruits for the rebels and he could recruit them. The crewmen who had good reports might be less trustworthy, although Colin knew that the reports themselves weren't exactly perfect. One of the comments in his own file had come from a superior officer Colin had only met once, back before he'd accepted Admiral Percival's offer of patronage. It hadn't been a pleasant comment, which struck Colin as vaguely amusing; he'd barely remembered the meeting himself.

An hour later, he put the file aside and stared around the bridge. The superdreadnaught's flag bridge was massive, as befitted a command ship and one of the most powerful starships in the Empire, but Colin found it oddly exposed. Even the battlecruiser's bridge had been more cramped than the superdreadnaught's. Dozens of consoles were scattered around, each one manned by a crewman, including several that Colin had transferred from the Observation Squadron. They'd spent the last few days drilling endlessly until Colin was fairly sure that the fleet could operate as a unit, although they wouldn't know for sure until they went into battle, or at least conducted some live-fire drills. They would have to wait until they'd secured the Annual Fleet and then escaped out beyond the Rim. And once the fleet was there…

Don't count your chickens before they have hatched, he reminded himself, as he studied the massive holographic display floating in the centre of the bridge. Camelot's star, an oddly-variable G2 star, was a bare two light years away. On a human scale, it might as well have been on the other side of the galaxy, but anyone who graduated from the Imperial Navy's Academy — to say nothing of the far-tougher

OCS — would know just how stellar geography played a role in naval combat. It was quite possible that Admiral Percival's Sector Fleet would be able to respond to a distress call from the Annual Fleet — one brought by a destroyer or picket boat that escaped the attack — and get there in time to wreck Colin's plan. Colin would have preferred to attack at the fleet's last waypoint, but Stacy Roosevelt's timing had been inconvenient. And, of course, once the fleet arrived at Camelot, attacking it would be impossible.

He clicked his wristcom and brought up a display he'd programmed into it the day they'd flickered out, away from Jackson's Folly. The bulk freighter he'd given to the loyalists had been carefully selected, for its flicker drive was in poor condition. It was perfectly safe, it would just take Stacy and the rest of the loyalists at least two weeks to return to Camelot, four days after Colin ambushed the Annual Fleet. The vindictive side of his nature kept reminding him that he could have programmed the ship to take the loyalists straight into the local sun, but he forced it down. A mass slaughter, he kept telling himself, would only make it harder for others to surrender.

"Admiral, the drills have been completed," Flag Captain Jeremy Damiani reported. Stacy Roosevelt's former Flag Captain had volunteered to serve with the rebels — and, after reading his file, Colin had understood why. Stacy had poured so much poison into his file that Damiani didn't have a hope of transferring to any other position — or patron. Colin wasn't entirely sure if he trusted the man, but he was short on experienced officers and besides, there were armed Marines scattered throughout the superdreadnaught. "Your ship is ready for battle."

"Thank you, Captain," Colin said, gravely. It felt weird to be called Admiral, yet he'd taken the title for himself. It also felt bittersweet. He would never command a starship again, lord and master under God; he would never know the joys and sorrows of independent command. He was devoted to his cause — after everything he'd done, the Empire would never forgive him or his followers — yet part of him still wanted to command. "Are the external racks loaded and deployed?"

"Yes, Admiral," Damiani said. "We are ready for Sucker Punch."

Colin felt an odd twinge of guilt at his words. He cared very little for the commanding officers of the Annual Fleet, but he cared a great deal about the crewmen onboard the ships. Many of them — indeed, perhaps most of them — would want to join the rebels, if they were offered the chance. Colin didn't dare offer them that chance. A freighter might take hours to repower its drive and flicker out, leaving the freighters sitting ducks for his fleet, but the same couldn't be said of the military ships escorting the civilian vessels. A destroyer or a

courier boat would only need a few minutes to repower and spin up the flicker drive, jumping to Camelot to alert Admiral Percival. Colin held Percival in the deepest of contempt, yet even he would react quickly to anything threatening the Annual Fleet. He didn't dare risk allowing anyone to sound the alarm, which meant that he had to destroy the escorts as quickly as possible, without offering or accepting surrender.

You're a hypocrite, he told himself, tartly. *You say that you don't want to engage in mass slaughter, yet you are willing to plan the deaths of hundreds of thousands just to ensure that you can loot the fleet in peace*.

He shook his head, dismissing the thought. "Good," he said, instead. He glanced down at the display. It was empty, apart from the shaded icons representing his fleet, lurking under cloaking fields. The second they opened fire, the escorts would know that they were there and even where they were, but by then it would be far too late. Or so Colin hoped. If there was one other lesson that was pummelled into the heads of young cadets at the Academy, it was KISS: Keep It Simple, Stupid. The simpler an operational plan, they'd been told, the less that could go spectacularly wrong. "And all we have to do now is wait."

"Yes, sir," Damiani said. "Admiral… how long are we going to wait?"

Colin understood his concern. The information they'd recovered from Stacy Roosevelt's files had been the latest she'd had, but it had been nine months out of date when it had been sent to her. It was quite possible that the Annual Fleet's commander had decided to change the waypoint coordinates, or even decided to risk jumping from their last waypoint direct to Camelot. Colin and his rebel fleet could wait for weeks without knowing what had happened, or that they'd missed their target.

"As long as it takes," Colin said. It wasn't entirely hopeless. One of Daria's ships had the Camelot System under permanent observation. They'd know if the Annual Fleet arrived and that the rebels had missed their chance. "We lose this and we have to go back to Plan B."

Damiani frowned. "Plan B?"

"I'm still working on it," Colin admitted. He had a contingency plan, but it wasn't one he wanted to share, not yet. "Without the Annual Fleet, we'd take much longer to build up a rebel fleet…"

"Admiral," the tactical officer barked. "*Contacts*! I have multiple starships, flickering in right on top of us!"

Colin braced himself as new red icons flared into existence on the display. The tactical computers were already categorising them, separating the freighters from their escorts, before assigning new targeting priorities to the datanet. The superdreadnaughts and

battlecruisers were already linked together; now, with their targets finally in range, they were targeting the enemy ships and preparing to fire.

"Fire," Colin ordered, quietly.

The superdreadnaught shuddered as it unleashed the first massive broadside. Even without the external racks, a superdreadnaught could launch over three hundred missiles per salvo, but the external racks tripled the superdreadnaught's throw weight. All nine superdreadnaughts had fired in the same moment, their missiles linked into the datanet and roaring towards their targets, backed up by ECM and decoys designed to make it harder for the enemy tactical computers to defeat the incoming salvo. It was overkill, as Colin's council of war had pointed out, but he didn't dare take chances. They had to win their first battle.

"Impact in forty seconds," the tactical officer said.

* * *

Sonja relaxed slightly as the jump completed, feeling the knot of tension in her stomach slowly unlocking and fading away. At least they'd been jumping from rest, rather than at high speed. It wouldn't have been a pleasant experience for the freighter crewmen, of course, but her crews could handle the sensation. A combat jump, on the other hand, would have been much more dangerous and uncomfortable.

"Get me an updated count on the ships," she ordered. She wouldn't have put it past the civilian ships to somehow screw up the coordinates — even if they were slaved to her ship — and appear somewhere else. Civilians couldn't be trusted. Every naval officer knew that. "I want them all located…"

"*Commodore*," the tactical officer interrupted. Sonja whirled around, her rebuke fading away as she took in his tone of panic. She'd never heard him badly shaken before, even when they'd jumped alarmingly close to an asteroid and almost rammed it. "We have incoming missiles! We're under attack!"

Chapter Eight

For a moment, sheer disbelief held Sonja frozen. Who would dare to attack the Annual Fleet? No pirate fleet could hope to have the firepower needed to take on the defenders… and then she looked at the display and knew what she was facing. Thousands of missiles were roaring towards her ships, her computers faithfully identifying them as Imperial Navy-standard Mark-VII Shipkillers. A superdreadnaught couldn't stand against such firepower and a battlecruiser like *Pegasus* was flimsy by comparison. She glanced down at the timer at the bottom of the display and swore. There were at least seven minutes before the battlecruiser could flicker out and escape and, by then, they would be destroyed several times over.

"Bring up the point defence," she ordered, as training took over. The escorting ships had, thankfully, already established their datanet. There might be no hope of survival, yet they could at least force the enemy to pay a price — and, perhaps, if they held out long enough, one of the smaller ships could get out and alert the sector fleet. She would die doing her duty. "Find me the attackers!"

The display updated as the battlecruiser's sensors went active, sweeping space for targets and locking in on the source of the missiles. Nine massive starships were wobbling out of cloak, already belching a second swarm of missiles towards her ships… and she knew despair for the first time. They were Imperial Navy *superdreadnaughts*… and that meant that the sector fleet was compromised. They hadn't encountered hostile aliens, or even rebels from beyond the Rim; Admiral Percival's ships had either fallen into enemy hands, or perhaps he'd decided to rebel against the Empire. Who knew? She had never trusted Percival and, judging from a few of their comments, neither had her patrons. The presence of a handful of smaller ships beside the behemoths was irrelevant. Only the superdreadnaughts mattered.

"Target the lead superdreadnaught," she ordered. The enemy ships weren't broadcasting IFF signals — a breach of Imperial Law, part of her mind wittered uselessly — and so there was no way to isolate the command ship. Standard Imperial practice was to have the command ship in the middle, where it would be protected by its eight siblings, but there was no way to know how the unknown commander would operate. A brave commander might lead from the front; a coward — and she knew that Percival was a coward — would command from the rear. "Open fire."

The battlecruiser lurched as it opened its tubes and launched the first salvo towards its target, rapidly combining its fire with that of its

comrades. She silently cursed the regulation that forbade the deployment of external racks on convoy escort ships, even though there had been no time to deploy them before the enemy ships opened fire. If she'd thought to load the racks at the last waypoint, instead of waiting impatiently… she shook her head angrily, watching as the storm of icons roared down on her ships. There were only a few seconds left.

The point defence systems did what they could. Decoys were launched, attempting to spoof the missiles into wasting themselves uselessly against drones. The datanet wove long-range tactical lasers, short-range plasma cannons and even close-combat rail guns into a single deadly net, knocking missiles out one by one… but there were always more missiles. Their own penetrator aids helped confuse the point defence, convincing the computers that they weren't facing thousands of missiles, but hundreds of thousands. Sonja watched helplessly as the missiles passed through the outer defence grid and roared down towards her shields. Her engineering crew had diverted all the power they could to the protective bubble surrounding the ship, yet she knew that it was too little, too late.

She glanced at the timer and knew that there would be no escape, no last-minute relief from death. The enemy ships had fired so many missiles that they could spread them out over her entire fleet, taking them all out in the first salvo, sparing nothing, not even a picket ship. It made sense, she knew; whoever was in command of the opposition was ruthless, but capable — far more capable than Percival. A hundred missiles slammed into a destroyer and it vanished in a ball of flame, followed rapidly by a battlecruiser and two heavy cruisers. The enemy missiles were retargeting, moving from destroyed ships to retarget themselves on ships that had remained intact. Dozens were lost, to point defences or to drones and decoys, but the remainder just kept coming. There was no escape.

Sonja keyed the intercom. "My crew," she said, finding herself lost for words. She hadn't been that bad a commander, had she? How did they think of her on the lower decks? Did it even matter? It had certainly never mattered to her when she had been the mistress of everything she surveyed. "It's been an honour."

Thirty seconds later, nineteen missiles impacted on the battlecruiser's shields and slammed through to the hull. Sonja had a microsecond to see the bridge disintegrating into fire… and then there was nothing, but darkness. Her mighty ship disintegrated into a ball of flaming plasma. There were no survivors.

* * *

“Incoming missiles,” the tactical officer warned. Colin watched, impressed that the escorting units had even managed to get a few shots off before they had been destroyed. It was only a pitiful handful compared to the salvo he’d thrown at them, but it was enough to be dangerous — assuming that they made their way through the fleet’s datanet and point defence. They’d targeted the *General Montgomery* in particular, although he wasn’t sure if they’d known it was the command ship or they’d simply fired at the ship leading the charge. “Point defence is coming active… now!

Colin forced himself to relax, even though he wanted to lean forward, as if he could somehow strengthen the point defence by sheer force of will. The superdreadnaughts might have all the beauty and charm of a brick, but they were armed with enough point defence to stand off hundreds of missiles, along with the sensors to separate out real missiles from the decoys. It didn’t look as if the escorts had managed to program in a proper attack pattern before they’d been attacked, a testament to how badly they’d been taken by surprise, but it wouldn’t have mattered. They hadn’t fired anything like enough missiles to swamp the superdreadnaught’s defences.

His fleet closed in around the *General Montgomery*, adding their weapons fire to the point defence. One by one, the enemy missiles were wiped out, until only a handful survived long enough to make their terminal attack runs. Only one of them made it through the defences to slam harmlessly against the superdreadnaught’s shields, barely even shaking the massive starship. The internal compensators compensated easily. Colin checked on the shield generator and smiled in relief. It had barely been touched, yet alone burned out by the hit.

“No damage, sir,” the damage control officer reported. One reason for the superdreadnaughts having such massive crews was for damage control, but there hadn’t even been any damage. Colin understood, for the first time, just how some planets had felt when the superdreadnaughts had appeared in their skies, big enough to be seen from the ground by the naked eye. What was the point of rebelling — even destroying — local authority when the superdreadnaughts would arrive and bombard the planet back into submission? “We are fully mission-capable.”

“Good,” Colin said, studying the display. The last of the escorts had been destroyed, without even a hope of getting out a warning. The Annual Fleet — all fifty massive civilian freighters, carrying over a trillion credits worth of industrial material — was at his mercy. “Open a channel to the freighters.”

“Aye, sir,” the communications officer said. “Channel open, Admiral.”

Colin smiled. “Attention, civilian freighters,” he said. “This is

Admiral Walker of the Shadow Fleet." He'd decided to name the fleet after the battlecruiser, knowing that the name would become legend, not least because his force wouldn't be the *first* Shadow Fleet. With any luck, Imperial Intelligence would conclude that the reports of that fleet's destruction had been premature. "You are ordered to deactivate your defences and prepare to be boarded. If you offer no resistance, you will not be harmed. Any resistance will result in the destruction of your vessels."

It was a bluff, but he hoped that they were too shaken to draw the correct conclusion and call him on it. He didn't dare destroy the freighters, although there were plenty of other options. The Marines could force-board the ships and capture the crew, although that did include the risk of introducing random factors into the equation. The crews might do something stupid that would destroy the ships, even though Stacy's files had started that the ships didn't carry any self-destruct systems.

"We're picking up signals from most of the ships, sir," the communications officer said. "They're surrendering and dropping their shields."

Colin smiled in relief. No warning had gone out to Camelot, but it was still well to complete their business quickly and then get away from the sector fleet's HQ. "Neil," he said, keying his wristcom, "you are authorised to board the freighters as quickly as possible and get them underway."

"Understood, sir," the Marine Colonel said. "We're on our way."

Colin leaned back in his command chair and watched the display. The remaining freighters had seen sense and surrendered, deactivating their defences and waiting patiently for the Marines. He hoped they didn't think that his fleet was composed of pirates. Very few merchant skippers would willingly surrender to pirates, knowing what pirates would do to their crew, particularly if their crew including women and children. One duty the Imperial Navy did that Colin approved of completely was suppressing pirates.

He studied the timer on the display thoughtfully, knowing that they would have to wait at least four hours before the freighters could finish powering up their drives and flicker out, to a set of coordinates that Colin had provided. There, a handful of military-grade transports that Daria had somehow obtained — Colin didn't want to know how, although he suspected bribery — would take the cargo onwards to a secure location beyond the Rim. The Imperial Navy often disposed of older ships onto the civilian market and it wasn't unknown for underground organisations or terrorists — or pirates — to bribe the Navy into authorising their purchase.

One by one, the ships were boarded and secured. Now all they

had to do was wait.

* * *

Colonel Neil Frandsen watched through the shuttle's sensors as they closed in on the freighter, moving in a random evasive pattern just in case the freighter's crew was feeling particularly bold or stupid. The freighters were only armed with minimal point defence and shields — the Family-run shipping lines had long since decided to cut all, but the most essential costs — but they were more than enough to take out a shuttle, even an armoured Goblin. The freighter was massive. If they had to board her by force and secure her it could take hours, even for trained Marines.

"This is Guard-One," he said, linking his communications system directly into the freighter. "Please have your entire crew assembled on the bridge when we board and have the Captain meet us at the airlock. There is no need to make this difficult."

The docking port winked open ahead of them and the pilot guided the shuttle towards it, mating her up neatly with the freighter. By Imperial Law, all airlocks and docking ports had to be standardised, even though there were ways to make the process quicker and more efficient. Neil had long suspected that the real reason for the law was so that the Families — which owned the factories that produced the airlocks — could maintain their monopoly, but he had to admit that it wasn't such a bad idea. As long as all the airlocks were standard, they could carry out emergency rescue missions without worrying about having to cut through the hull.

"Remember," he warned, as the air pressure equalised, "be gentle unless they decide to show us any hostility."

The airlock hissed open and he stepped through, followed rapidly by two other Marines wearing powered combat armour. It was unlikely that the freighter crew carried anything that could punch through the armour, but freighter crew did tend to carry a wide variety of weapons and it was quite possible that they had something they thought could harm the Marines. Besides, the armour was quite intimidating and hopefully it would discourage resistance. He waited impatiently for the inner airlock to hiss open and stepped into the freighter proper. The vessel's Captain, as per instructions, was waiting for them. She was an older woman, with greying hair and a beaten demeanour, although she held herself proudly.

"Welcome aboard," she said, curtly. It was probably the most insincere greeting Neil had ever received, although he decided to accept it at face value. The freighter's crew had witnessed their escorts

being destroyed — with no losses to the attackers — and had to have been thoroughly cowed. Or so Neil hoped. The last thing he needed was for someone to start thinking that he could act like a hero. “I will escort you to the bridge.”

Neil followed her though a secure hatch — hearing the sounds of three more Marines cycling through the airlock behind him — and onto the bridge. It wasn’t as efficient as a military vessel, but that wasn’t the real surprise. The real surprise was the crew; four men, five women and seven children of varying ages. The freighter, he realised in surprise, was a family-run business. If it was like others he had seen over the years, the crew would have been independent until they’d finally run afoul of the law and had to contract themselves out to one of the big shipping lines. They’d probably told themselves that they’d work themselves free within the year, only to find that their debts kept mounting and there was no hope of escape. If they’d been captured by pirates… it didn’t bear thinking about.

“Thank you,” he said, resolving to be as polite as possible. There was no need to make it difficult for the Captain. “Is this all your crew?”

“Yes,” the Captain said, shortly.

“I’m going to have to ask you all to remain here while we search the ship,” Neil informed her. He didn’t think that the Captain was lying, but it was always a possibility. “Once we have secured the ship and powered up the drive, we will jump out to a secure location and unload the cargo. After that, you will be free to join us or depart, as you see fit.”

He linked in with the Marines searching the ship and skimmed through their reports. There were no unpleasant surprises hidden away, apart from a small collection of weapons that couldn’t have penetrated Marine armour. It was lucky that the crew hadn’t tried to resist. He rather hoped that they would behave themselves for the rest of the trip. He was quite prepared to stun or cuff them if necessary, but he hoped it wouldn’t be necessary. A trained crew willing to join the rebels would be very useful.

Not all of the ship crews were being so cooperative. A couple had tried to offer armed resistance, while several others had flatly refused to cooperate with the Marines. Neil suspected that they were worried about what the shipping line would say afterwards; the Thousand Families would be looking for someone to blame and they might just focus on the freighter crews. As the time ticked away, he allowed himself to relax slightly. Once the drives were powered up, they could be away in a split-second, without any possibility of pursuit. And then the cargo could be unloaded at leisure.

* * *

"The freighters are all reporting in, sir," the communications officer said. "They're ready to jump out on command."

Colin relaxed slightly. It was probably only nerves, but he'd had the creeping sense that they'd been running out of time as the seconds ticked away. He *knew* that it was unlikely that anyone could intercept them, or even realise that something had gone wrong until it was far too late, yet somehow his mind refused to *believe* it. They might well have pushed their luck too far. If Admiral Percival's fleet arrived, Colin would have had no choice, but to destroy the freighters and jump out, calling it a draw.

He looked up again at the icon representing Camelot and smiled. "Send them the coordinates for the jump," he ordered. He'd kept them back, even from the Marines, until it was time to go. If they'd had to pull out in a hurry, it would have meant abandoning the Marines to the tender mercies of the mind techs and Imperial Intelligence. "And then prepare to jump out ourselves."

"Aye, sir," the helmsman said. Colin could feel the tension draining away. The rebels had their first victory, an overwhelmingly one-sided victory. It was a shame that he couldn't gloat about it to Admiral Percival, or insert it into the Interstellar Communications Network, but the longer no one knew what had happened to the Annual Fleet, the better. By the time they reached their base out beyond the Rim, Admiral Percival would know what had happened at Jackson's Folly. "We are ready to jump."

Colin nodded. "Take us out of here," he ordered. "You may jump when ready."

He relaxed as the flicker drive engaged, moving the entire fleet eight light years from Camelot. The cargo would be transferred — along with some of the Marines, just to make sure that none of it got lost along the way — and then he and his fleet would head out to meet up with Daria. And then the real war could begin.

His smile grew wider. He just wished he could see Percival's face when he heard the news.

Chapter Nine

By any standard one wished to use, Captain Penelope Quick — Penny to her friends — knew, Camelot had not been a great terraforming success. The planet had been marginally habitable when the Imperial Navy's survey ship had discovered it, nearly a hundred years ago. The first Sector Commander had brought in the terraforming crews and ordered them to turn the world — claimed by the Imperial Navy because most of the prime real estate in Sector 117 had been claimed by the Families — into a garden, but the teams were still working on it, seventy years later. From her vantage point on the orbital headquarters, floating in high orbit around the planet, she could see monstrous storms moving across the planet's surface. The terraforming crews claimed that it would be another hundred years — at least — before the planet settled down and became habitable. The only habitations currently on the planet were reinforced domes and underground complexes, holding over two million Imperial Navy and supporting personnel. Even so, the important work in the system was conducted in orbit.

The datachip felt heavy in her pocket, a reminder that she was delaying — no, procrastinating. An hour ago, a bulk freighter had flickered into the Camelot system, narrowly escaping destruction by the patrolling destroyers. Admiral Percival's orders had been strict — any unexpected arrivals were to be chased down at once — and the ship's passengers had been lucky to survive. And one of the passengers, Commodore Stacy Roosevelt, had given Penny the datachip and told her to take it to her superior, Admiral Percival himself.

Penny shook her head as she gazed down at the planet below. Stacy had departed Camelot two weeks ago with nine superdreadnaughts and five heavy transports. It didn't take much imagination to realise that something had gone dreadfully wrong, not if she'd transferred her flag to a bulk freighter that was well past its best. Penny also knew why Stacy wanted her to take the datachip — and the first report — to Admiral Percival. The Admiral was known for shooting the messenger, sometimes literally. It said something about just how bad the situation was, how bad it had to be, that Stacy had chosen to avoid speaking to the Admiral herself. Perhaps even her connections, second to none on Camelot, couldn't protect her from the consequences of her failure.

The thought made Penny smile, bitterly. Years ago, the young and naive Lieutenant Quick had the misfortune of catching the eye of Admiral Percival. Percival's offer had been simple enough; he wanted

a sexual partner and he was willing to extend his patronage to Penny, in exchange for her warming his bed. Penny, who had been chafing at her slow advance in the ranks of the Imperial Navy, had accepted the bargain and discovered — too late — that Percival was a sadist of the highest order. He could be charming, even seductive, when he wanted to be, but he saw no reason to show those traits to her, not now. And, because Penny had a close association with Percival, no other patron would consider touching her. She was faced with the unenviable task of serving as Percival's aide as well as his sexual toy, for if Percival ever fell from grace, he would take her down with him. There seemed to be no way out.

Penny shook her head, remembering those early days and how she had caught his eye. She had long blonde hair and bright blue eyes, although they seemed to reflect her inner sadness when she wasn't taking care to project a smiling face to the world. It was no wonder that Percival had been attracted to her, all those years ago; indeed, sexual favours in return for advancement were common in the Imperial Navy. She had just been one of the unlucky ones who had discovered that the game wasn't worth the candle. Instead of a single night of passion, she spent every night in Percival's bed… and the improved pay and prestige wasn't worth it. She wished that she could go back to her younger self, the ambitious Lieutenant, and tell the silly bitch to be content with her lot.

The datachip seemed to grow heavier as she turned and walked into the secured inner section of the massive space station. Admiral Percival commanded the sector from Camelot, rather than from the bridge of his flagship or down on the planet. It hadn't taken her long to realise that Percival was something of a coward. The space station, which had defences that rivalled a superdreadnaught, was far safer than the planetary surface. She had carefully refrained from pointing out to him that the space station was also a bigger target. Besides, it wasn't as if the Empire was about to go to war.

She passed through two layers of security around the Admiral's private compartment, wincing as the Blackshirts on guard ran sensor probes over her body, before entering the antechamber and taking a moment to catch her breath. Whatever was on the datachip, it couldn't be good. The thought of passing it to a younger officer and ordering him to give it to the Admiral was tempting, but Penny liked to think that she had more integrity than that. Besides, Percival might not be so quick to dispose of her. He'd have to find another partner as well as a competent aide.

"Come in," Percival's voice said, as she keyed the access panel. Penny braced herself and stepped inside. For a man with such depraved tastes, Admiral Percival's office was fairly simple, decorated

with only a handful of artworks. It had taken her several years to realise that Percival, by decorating his office in such a manner, was making a statement to his social superiors. Stacy Roosevelt had probably understood it at once. “I trust that you have an update on the Annual Fleet?”

“No, sir,” Penny said, as she saw Percival sitting at his desk, reading a datapad. “There is no update from the Annual Fleet.”

She pasted a concerned expression on her face as the Admiral keyed a switch, bringing up the lights in the compartment to full intensity. Admiral Percival had been handsome once, yet now he looked unpleasant, although honesty compelled her to admit that that might be her awareness of his inner nature talking. He was balding, with a chest that was going steadily to fat, concealed only by skilful tailoring. His piggish eyes stared suspiciously at her, for once without the lust her skilfully tailored uniform awoke in his mind. Admiral Percival might not have had the connections and patronage he claimed to have — if he had, he would have been Grand Admiral — but he was an expert at the great game of intrigue and could tell when something was badly wrong. And, the nasty part of her mind whispered, he was right.

The Admiral had been worried for the last three days about the Annual Fleet, which had been meant to arrive five days ago. Penny herself wasn’t so worried. The fleet was coming directly from the Core Worlds and it was almost certain to be delayed, whatever the Imperial Navy might have promised. Percival knew that, at least theoretically, but his contacts with the Roosevelt Family were breathing down his neck. It was a complete waste of time. There was nothing Percival could do to make the fleet arrive faster. And, of course, he knew that, adding to his foul temper at the unjust nature of the universe.

She took a moment to think, parsing her words carefully. “Admiral, Commodore Roosevelt has returned from Jackson’s Folly,” she said. If she could make sure that Stacy got all the blame, perhaps she could escape unscathed. “There has been an incident.”

Percival stared at her. He would have been informed at once if the superdreadnaughts had returned, but he had missed Stacy’s bulk freighter. No one had known who the ship carried until the Marines had boarded her and discovered Stacy and three hundred officers and men.

“An incident,” he repeated. He sounded suspicious. “What kind of incident?”

Penny kept her face carefully blank. “She lost the superdreadnaughts,” she said. Percival’s eyes opened wide. “This datachip is supposed to explain it.”

She leaned over and inserted the chip into the Admiral’s reader,

watching over Percival's shoulder as the image appeared on the screen. A young officer, wearing a Commander's uniform, was standing in Stacy's flag deck, on the superdreadnaught. Penny didn't recognise him, but from Percival's sudden intake of breath, it was clear that he did.

"Admiral Percival," the unnamed Commander said. His voice was mocking, almost cocky. "By now, you will know that we have taken over both the Observation Squadron and Commodore Roosevelt's superdreadnaught squadron. You may consider this a declaration of war. We are officers and men who have grown aware of the true nature of the Empire — and of people such as you — and we are sworn to bring it down, or die trying. I advise you to consider surrender. We are coming for you."

Penny concealed her own reaction with an effort, for Percival had gone red with anger. It was clear that the message had been carefully designed to incite him to fury, perhaps to push him into doing something stupid. It wasn't a very informative message, but then, the real message had been Stacy Roosevelt's return to Camelot. It not only proved that the Commander was telling the truth, yet it was also a gesture of contempt. Besides, she thought in the privacy of her own head, returning Stacy only hurt the Empire. Shooting her in the head or blowing her out the airlock would have been rather more helpful.

"*Walker*," Percival hissed. He seemed to be having difficulty controlling himself. "God damn it — I *told* Howell he couldn't be trusted!"

That, Penny suspected, was an outright lie. Whoever Commander Walker was, if there had been the slightest suggestion from the Admiral that he couldn't be trusted, he would not have been promoted to Commander, let alone transferred to the Observation Squadron. She pulled her personal terminal off her belt and checked its records. There was a Commander Colin Walker attached to the Observation Squadron, Captain Howell's XO. The image matched.

Percival glared up at her. "What happened?"

"I don't know, sir," Penny admitted. She was more shaken than she cared to admit. A rebel with an entire squadron of superdreadnaughts under his command could do a great deal of damage before the Empire found and destroyed the ships. If the Empire ever *did* find and destroy the ships, for space was vast and it was impossible to cover all of the possible targets. How had Stacy managed to lose the ships? "All I have is that datachip."

Percival stared down at the table. "Call a meeting," he ordered, finally. "I want to speak to Stacy personally and then we will decide what to do."

* * *

Penny hoped that the cosmetic scales on her face covered the bruises as she followed Admiral Percival into the Flag Briefing Room. Percival had heard Stacy's account of what had happened — Penny suspected that it had been modified a little to make Stacy look better, although nothing could have saved her from looking a total fool — and thrown a furious tantrum of his own. Penny wanted to rub her cheek where he'd slapped her, but it would only have drawn attention to the marks. She just hoped that no one could see them.

"Attention on deck," Admiral Percival growled. The four people waiting for them stood up at once. "Be seated. We have a long day ahead of us."

He took his own chair and looked at Stacy Roosevelt. "Rebels have taken a superdreadnaught squadron," he said, flatly. "Apparently, the Observation Squadron decided to mutiny and then take the superdreadnaughts when Commodore Roosevelt arrived. They were totally successful."

Penny watched the other two Commodores, the commanders of Percival's remaining superdreadnaught squadrons, as Percival outlined what had happened. Commodore William, an older man with a sense of decency, looked shocked, almost as if he was unable to believe what had happened. William — like Percival, he had rejected his family's name, being very low in the hierarchy — might not have been the most competent of officers, but he was reliable. Penny would have given her right eye to serve under him.

Commodore Rupert Brent-Cochrane, on the other hand, was clearly enjoying Stacy's discomfort. Brent-Cochrane — the name signified a pairing between two different branches of the Thousand Families — was young, ambitious and completely ruthless. He had carried out two scorching missions of worlds that had dared to rise in revolt against the Empire and ruled his crew with an iron hand. A tiny medal on his uniform marked him as a member of the Disciples of Gor, a cult that existed within the Thousand Families and some of their most trusted sycophants. Few knew for sure what they did behind closed doors, but some of the rumours were terrifying. The man might have been classically handsome — the result of expensive modifications by body-shapers — yet his eyes told the true story. The Commodore was even more of a sadist than Percival.

William Derbyshire, Imperial Intelligence's Head of Station, looked uncomfortable and well he might, Penny knew. Imperial Intelligence had clearly failed badly, for they hadn't detected the mutiny plot, let alone prevented it from being carried out. Percival would be looking for scapegoats and, unless Penny missed her guess,

most of the blame would fall on Imperial Intelligence. They should have had agents onboard the Observation Squadron and none of them, it seemed, had picked up any hint of what was about to happen. It seemed, even, that most of the agents had been sent back to Camelot with Stacy Roosevelt.

"An entire superdreadnaught squadron lost to rebels," Brent-Cochrane said, finally. He grinned nastily at Stacy. His connections were almost equal to hers — and, Penny had to admit, he was a great deal more competent. "What *were* you thinking?"

Stacy flinched under his smile. "I was carrying out orders from my family," she said. It sounded weak, as if she was desperately searching for excuses. Penny doubted the grown-ups in the Roosevelt Family would be pleased when they heard what had happened. Instead of given them Jackson's Folly, Stacy had given them a monumental embarrassment. "I was…"

She turned suddenly to look at Derbyshire. "Why didn't Imperial Intelligence pick up on the plot?"

Derbyshire didn't smile at her. "As yet, we have had no time to study the intelligence feed from the Observation Squadron," he said. Penny knew that he meant he needed time to find a way to cover his ass. "However, if only a tiny fraction of the crew were involved, it would be very hard to pick up any warning before it was too late."

"And then you let them board you," Brent-Cochrane mocked. "What *were* you thinking?"

"There is no point in assigning blame now," Admiral Percival said. Penny smiled inwardly, despite the throbbing pain on her cheek. Percival still needed the Roosevelt Family, needed them enough to cushion Stacy Roosevelt's fall. "Our mission is simple. We have to destroy or recapture those superdreadnaughts before they wreak havoc."

"I know," Brent-Cochrane grinned. "We launch a flight of shuttles and claim that they are more rebels trying to escape…"

He broke off as Percival glared at him. "How exactly do we recover those ships?"

There was a long pause. The blunt truth, they all knew, was that Walker could be anywhere. By now, he could be in the next sector, or far beyond the Rim. He'd declared war on the Empire, which meant that he would have to keep attacking… but also that he would be able to choose the time and place of his attacks. In order to defeat his force, Percival would have to intercept it with one of his own superdreadnaught squadrons. Penny had run a brief comparison and realised that there were hundreds of possible targets… and only two superdreadnaught squadrons that could be deployed to cover them against enemy threats.

The smart thing to do, she knew, would be to call in help from one of the other sectors, but Percival had already rejected that suggestion. Indeed, he'd slapped her for even mentioning the possibility, for he would look extremely bad when his peers heard about the loss of the superdreadnaughts. If he could hunt down and destroy the rebels quickly, his reputation could be saved, but unless the rebels flew right into the teeth of Camelot's defences — which was not likely to happen — it would prove impossible.

"The first priority is to deal with Jackson's Folly," Percival said. "They may have been involved in the mutiny; certainly, they used the planet as a base to plot their operations." Penny, who knew that there was no intelligence even suggesting that possibility, held her tongue. "They have to be prevented from aiding the rebels any further."

"So we scorch the planet and occupy the smaller worlds," Brent-Cochrane suggested eagerly. "That would prevent them from being of any assistance."

"No," Percival said. Stacy looked as if she wanted to say something as well, but held her tongue. "We need the worlds intact and their populations alive."

He straightened up. "Commodore Brent-Cochrane; you are ordered to take your superdreadnaughts to Jackson's Folly and occupy the planet," he said. "You will take with you four divisions of Security Division troops and additional squadrons of smaller ships — I will assign them to you tonight. The rebels may seek to engage your ships. If so, I expect you to defeat them and prevent Walker from causing any further harm."

"Of course, Admiral," Brent-Cochrane said.

"Penny, you will go with him," Percival added. "I want a full report from you personally."

"Yes, Admiral," Penny said. She was almost relieved, for she had a hunch that there was more bad news to come. She didn't want to be near Percival when it arrived. "I won't let you down."

Chapter Ten

"You do realise," Anderson pointed out, "that this isn't the most secure of places?"

Colin nodded. After supervising the transfer of the Annual Fleet's cargo to Daria's transports — most of the original transport crews had volunteered to join the rebels, rather than go back to the Empire and explain what had happened to the cargo — he'd taken the Shadow Fleet on a long trip out to the Rim, where they'd halted at a hidden facility belonging to the Freebooter's League. Colin himself, however, had taken *Shadow* and travelled to Sanctuary, an asteroid habitat along the Rim. It was a black colony orbiting a dull red star — hence unknown to the Empire — but it was surprisingly populated.

But then, perhaps it wasn't such a surprise. The Empire's expansion had driven the independent colonies out ahead of it, past the Rim. Millions of humans lived in hidden colonies, some working with others to try to build a civilisation, others hidden away so well that not even their fellows knew that they were there. Colin remembered reading a report of a hidden colony of survivalists on a world the Empire had settled, only stumbling over the colony by accident. The Rim might be dark and cold, at least according to the Empire's propaganda, yet it teemed with life.

Daria had promised that she would put the word out along the Rim, once the Shadow Fleet became a fleet in truth. Since Colin had arrived, he'd spent time chatting to everyone who was interested, including representatives from other hidden colonies and settlements, some of whom were tired of hiding. He hadn't realised just how many starships there were along the Rim, all of whom were completely off the books as far as the Empire was concerned, or how much trade there was between the Rim and the colonies at the very edge of the Empire. The massive Family-owned shipping lines might not call at the black colonies, but other starships did, their crews colluding with independent colonies to keep them alive. Some of them, Daria had admitted, were pirates, although the line between good and evil blurred along the Rim. If pirates brought life-saving supplies to hidden colonies — or even poor legal colonies — no one was going to question where it had come from. Besides, sticking it to the Empire was a tradition along the Rim.

Even so, not everyone was willing to commit to joining him. It wasn't too surprising. The Imperial Navy's usual way of dealing with a newly-discovered black colony was to demand surrender and transport the population elsewhere, if they didn't just launch a missile at it and destroy it in nuclear fire. Colin suspected that even if the rebels won,

even if they defeated the towering monolith that blighted so many lives, few of the hidden colonies would declare themselves. The habit of hiding was too ingrained by now.

"I know," Colin agreed. It was quite possible that Imperial Intelligence had its own agents on the asteroid; that they knew about Sanctuary and had simply chosen to leave it alone and try to use it to find other colonies. Anderson's warning was well-taken. He'd also talked Colin out of returning the freighter crews at once, pointing out that the longer the Empire remained uncertain of what had happened to the Annual Fleet, the fewer precautions they would take. "I don't think that we have a choice."

Shadow was lurking outside, the most powerful ship in the system, and he had a full company of Marines covering his back. Even so, he knew that he was dangerously exposed… and he loved it. For the first time in years, he truly felt alive, something he knew that was shared by most of his crew. His crew reassignments — promoting officers and men to their level of competence — seemed to work better than the Empire's haphazard approach to promotion. They might have been assured of certain death if the Empire ever caught them, yet they didn't seem to care. The Empire had created a system that bred resentment and hatred on a massive scale. All it had needed was someone to stand up and throw the shackles off.

He looked up as Daria entered the compartment. "I brought three people who wanted to meet you in person," she said. She looked back outside. "Come on in."

Colin lifted an eyebrow, which rapidly became a smile as he saw the first person entering the compartment. The man was a legend. The second was a woman he didn't recognise at first, but the third *had* to be a Geek, if only because of the biomechanical implants inserted into his body. Colin almost felt sick as he considered the warped and mutilated flesh. The Empire banned implants, outside the Thousand Families, the Marines and certain special cases, but the Geeks delighted in flouting that law. The man he was looking at was more machine than human being. The Geeks, according to rumour, could link into computers and control them directly. Colin could believe it.

"Admiral Walker," Daria said, with a hint of formality. Her face seemed more composed than normal. "Please allow me to introduce Captain Jason Cordova, Hester Hyman and Salgak."

Colin found himself coming to his feet, for Captain Cordova was a legend. Everyone in the Imperial Navy knew the story, even though Public Information had been trying for years to rewrite it, or even just to convince the crewmen to forget about Cordova. Hell, the man had inspired Colin himself. Twelve years ago, just before Colin and Admiral Percival had their fateful meeting, Captain Cordova had

found himself ordered to scorch a planet that had been unable to pay its taxes. The Empire didn't tolerate planets that refused to pay and didn't accept excuses. Cordova had refused the order and, when other starships had arrived to arrest him, had taken his starship and loyal crew out beyond the Rim. Since then, he had been a lurking presence on the border, even though he hadn't been able to do more than irritate the Empire. His ship, the *Random Numbers*, was only a heavy cruiser.

Cordova took Colin's hand, shaking it firmly. Perhaps it was just a trace of hero-worship, but he seemed somehow larger than life, with a long golden beard, a massive bright smile and a uniform that seemed to come from a bygone age. In some ways, he seemed too good to be true, leaving Colin feeling a twinge of jealousy. Cordova could probably have talked Stacy Roosevelt into surrendering without ever needing to board her ships; hell, his mere presence would probably have caused Admiral Percival to wet himself. Colin reminded himself that he'd taken nine superdreadnaughts and, in an afternoon, inflicted more damage than Cordova, in all his years, had ever done. The man might have been a legend, but he was still only a man.

Hester Hyman was, in her own way, just as much of a legend as Cordova. She looked middle-aged, her face bearing the scars of a botched rejuvenation treatment. Her long dark hair was streaked with grey and she held herself as if the only thing keeping her on her feet was her own force of will. She looked unremarkable, even to Colin, until he saw her eyes. They told the full story. This was a woman who had seen terrible things.

Colin knew her story, or at least the legend. Hester Hyman had been a housewife on an isolated colony world that had the misfortune to be governed by one of the worst governors in the Empire. Hester had been picked up one day, taken to the Governor's Mansion, and raped, along with many other girls from the colony. Hester had been thrown out afterwards and the governor had forgotten about her, a grave mistake. She had gone back to her family, rallied her support and led an uprising against the Empire. The Blackshirts had put it down eventually, but by then the Governor and most of his cronies had died in the fighting. Hester had been captured and sentenced to life on a penal colony, yet somehow she'd broken free, led her fellow prisoners to take over the penal ship and escaped out to the Rim. Since then, she had been another thorn in the Empire's side. The price on her head was second to none.

And, compared to two living legends, the Geek was almost unremarkable.

"You did extremely well," Hester said, once they were all seated. Colin had poured them all a glass of wine from Stacy Roosevelt's

private stock. It would have cost a Captain a year's salary to purchase even a single bottle of Old Scotch, yet Stacy had nine bottles in her cabin. "The Empire will not soon forget what you did."

"Thank you," Colin said. Hester's voice had surprised him. It was harsh, almost atonal, a chilling reminder of what the Empire had done to her when they had her in their clutches. She had once been pretty, perhaps beautiful. Now… her face was scarred and her body seemed to be in constant pain. "It's only the beginning."

"It will require time to assimilate the materials that you have brought us," Salgak stated. The Geek leader — or representative, seeing the Geeks used a democratic system to make decisions — spoke with a harsh, buzzing voice. At some point in the past, he'd removed his vocal chords and replaced it with a mechanical speaker. Colin wondered — he had no intention of asking — if the Geek had also replaced his genitals. There were some questions he really didn't want to know if they had an answer. "We can produce certain materials for your ships at once; more advanced ships will take time, at least six months."

Colin smiled inwardly. Not even the Thousand Families could keep something the size of the Empire in technological stasis, no matter how much they might wish to try. Even so, they were determined to limit technological advancement as much as possible, fearful of the consequences if something were to be developed that would change or undermine the economic base of the Empire. The scientists in the Empire either worked for the Thousand Families or they found themselves transferred to planets so primitive that they thought that a time machine meant a watch — or they ran off to the Rim and joined the Geeks. Or, if they were focused on the biological sciences, they joined the Nerds.

The Empire disliked all of the revolutionary groups, of course, but it reserved a special hatred for the Geeks. They feared that the Geeks would one day produce a weapon that could make the entire Imperial Navy obsolete overnight, or that they would succeed in hacking into Imperial Navy starships and trigger their self-destructs. Indeed, all the cut-outs built into Imperial Navy computer systems were designed to prevent an outside force from hacking in, something Colin found rather reassuring. The thought of Admiral Percival being able to blow up his ships simply by transmitting a command code to their systems wasn't a pleasant thought at all.

And perhaps the Empire had good reason to worry. There was far more industrial talent and resources along the Rim than anyone, even Imperial Intelligence, had guessed. Combined with the materials he'd hijacked from the Annual Fleet, the Rim could become a real threat to the Empire. It would take time, however, and he had to ensure that

the Empire remained off-balance. If his calculations were accurate, Admiral Percival would know about what had happened at Jackson's Folly by now.

"We have the time," Colin assured him. The Empire might have the force of a sledgehammer, but it needed a target — and locating the hidden shipyards would be almost impossible. Daria had told him that the Geeks kept most of their facilities hidden away from everyone, even her. "And, once we are ready, we can go on the offensive."

"We have been discussing the issue," Hester said. "I represent a union of underground groups that is interested in taking part in your war. We do, however, have two concerns. The first one is simple. What will replace the Empire after you win?"

Colin hesitated. If the truth were told, he hadn't considered the question properly — and he had only focused on the Imperial Navy. He knew that the Empire needed some heavy reform, yet some would want that reform to go further than others. The Empire's only real justification for its existence was that it united the human race — after the disunity prior to the First Interstellar War had nearly seen the human race exterminated — and breaking the Empire up would be disastrous. Yet… others would disagree. They would see the Empire's very existence as evil and demand that it be broken up, leading — inevitably — to humanity fighting wars between the successor states. And then there were the aliens… very few humans would want to grant them freedom, not after centuries of propaganda about how the aliens would destroy the human race, given half a chance.

"I believe that it would be better to destroy the Empire first and then worry about the aftermath," he said, finally. "I could promise you the universe, yet I might not be able to *keep* that promise."

Hester's lips twitched. It took Colin a second to realise that it was a smile… and that she *couldn't* smile properly. The Empire had taken that from her, along with everything else. He did wonder why she didn't employ a body-shaper to repair the damage, but he had to admit that it made a hell of a message. She bore her scars proudly.

"That says well of you," Hester said. "We have too many factions here who would want promises before the war had even begun, let alone been won, and refuse to play unless they got what they wanted."

"Thank you," Colin said. He smiled inwardly at her reaction. "And what was the second concern?"

Hester reached out and tapped the terminal on the desk, inserting a datachip into the system and displaying a star chart in front of them. "We have been waging our own war against the Empire for years, before you decided to join us," she said. Colin felt a twinge of guilt.

Hester had been fighting the good fight for over forty years, while Colin had been an infant, and then Admiral Percival's client. It had taken a shocking personal betrayal for him to realise just what the Empire truly was, not a concern for the humans caught under its iron heel. "Many of our number have been captured and sentenced to Garstang. We want them liberated from the Empire."

Colin followed her pointing finger. Garstang was the Empire's latest penal world, a barely-habitable world on the edge of Sector 117. The convicts — including their families — were loaded into single-shot capsules, given a small amount of supplies and shot down to the planet's surface. Some penal worlds managed to form civilisations and tame their worlds, allowing the Empire to take them over and incorporate them into the Empire; others remained hellish worlds, ruled by warlords and criminals. The Empire didn't care. There was no shortage of rebels, criminals and undesirables to tame the penal worlds — or die trying.

He had to admit that it made an excellent first target. The penal worlds were defended, but they rarely had starships assigned to their defence, choosing instead to rely on orbital weapons platforms. The Imperial Navy crewmen assigned to the planets were hardly the best in the service — some of them had a habit of recovering convict women from the surface and taking them into orbit, where they were forced to service the crew — and a single superdreadnaught could probably blow right through the defences without suffering any damage.

"Tell me something," he said, looking at Cordova. A heavy cruiser could have coped with the defences of a penal world, if not easily. "Why didn't you go after them yourself?"

"We couldn't get a fleet of transports together," Cordova admitted. Behind him, Daria nodded. "There was no way of getting the convicts off the world before reinforcements arrived from the nearest system."

Colin nodded. The penal worlds would have a picket ship floating out nearby, drives and weapons stepped down — rendering it invisible to passive sensors. As soon as his fleet arrived, that ship would power up and flicker out, racing to the nearest world with an Imperial Navy squadron. If he went there with his full fleet, however, that picket would have to race to *Camelot* to summon reinforcements, and that would take at least three days. The most pessimistic estimate Colin could come up with was that they would have at least a week before they faced a force capable of destroying the Shadow Fleet. A week would be long enough to pick up quite a few people from the planet's surface. They would just have to be careful that they didn't take any real criminals with the rebels.

“Very well,” he said, finally. It would be an easy mission and it would blacken the Empire’s eye. It would also be a propaganda blow against the Empire’s penal system. “We will make that world our first target. I trust that you can provide transport ships for personnel lift?”

“Easily,” Daria said. She grinned. “I tell them that they’re going to be escorted by nine superdreadnaughts and they will be delighted to come along and join the fun.”

Colin grinned back. “And then we can start the real work,” he added. A plan was already unfolding in his mind. It would be risky, but if they could pull it off, the rewards would be worthwhile. He looked up at the Geek. “Can you modify a pair of bulk freighters for me?”

“Of course,” Salgak said. The Geek’s great head — so heavy that it had to be held in place with extra support — turned from side to side. His mechanical eye tracked Colin’s face. “What would you like us to do with them?”

Colin told him.

Chapter Eleven

"You understand what you have to do?"

Lieutenant-Commander (Gunboat) Markus Wilhelm nodded. He was a tall dark-haired man; seemingly too young for his rank and position, but gunboat pilots never lasted long. The Imperial Navy used them for reconnaissance and communication missions, even though they were easy targets to anyone with the right sensors and weapons. The Academy encouraged skilful young cadets to try out for gunboat duty, although Colin suspected — in his darker moments — in the hopes that ambitious and capable cadets would either get themselves killed or burn out early.

"Yes, sir," Wilhelm said. Gunboats traditionally carried only two crewmen, in this case Markus and his wife Carola. The Imperial Navy didn't discourage husband and wife from serving together, although having a pair in the same gunboat was unusual. Colin suspected that Wilhelm had paid someone a pretty hefty bribe back in the past. That, too, was not unusual. "It will be an easy mission."

Colin smiled, concealing his concern. Gunboat pilots had a great deal in common with the pilots of assault shuttles, or Marines; if they had any doubts at all they never showed them to their superior officers. The remainder of the Imperial Navy joked that they were too stupid to feel fear, or even common sense. Colin had long been fascinating by the unexplored possibilities offered by the Imperial Navy's gunboats, but Admiral Percival hadn't allowed him to try out some of his more interesting ideas. If there was one advantage to being a rebel, he had decided, it was that he could experiment without anyone moaning in his ear about budgets and acceptable expenses.

"I hope that you are right," Colin said. Even so, he'd decided to give the tactic its first run in a barely-defended system, just in case it wasn't as workable in practice as theory suggested. "Get in, make your readings and get out again; no heroics."

"Of course, sir," Wilhelm said. He made a show of checking his wristcom. "With your permission, sir…?"

"You may board your ship," Colin said. He'd obtained the old bulk freighter through Daria, but he'd never bothered to give the ship a name. Traditionally, renaming a freighter was left up to the freighter crew; Markus and his wife could argue over the ship's name. "Good luck."

"We'll do our bit," Wilhelm promised him. "You just be ready and waiting for us."

The pilot marched out of Colin's stateroom, leaving him alone and staring at the star chart displayed in front of him. It had been two

days since he had decided to launch the raid on Garstang, two days in which he had been making frantic preparations for the mission, along with a thousand other things. Even when he had been working for Admiral Percival, back when Percival had been a mere Commodore, he hadn't really understood how many responsibilities an Admiral had. The Observation Squadron had been thrown together for a single mission; it hadn't been a formal fleet. His rebel fleet, whatever else it was, was a formal fleet and had to be treated as such. Colin had too much to do and too little time to do it in.

He studied the series of expanding spheres on the display and frowned. Unless something had gone badly wrong, Admiral Percival would definitely have received his declaration of war by now… and would have had time to alert the nearest systems. There was no way to know for sure, but Colin knew better than to assume the worst. He'd run the calculations based on the least-time approach so beloved of the Imperial Navy and the word would be spreading throughout the sector. It was possible that Admiral Percival would want to conceal the scope of the disaster — reading through the secured files on the superdreadnaught, it was surprising how much had been concealed, even from the Imperial Navy's personnel — yet Colin doubted he would be that stupid. Percival's only hope for avoiding disaster — the complete termination of his career, as well as becoming a scapegoat for the mutiny — was to stop Colin before the rebellion got out of hand. He would have to warn the rest of the sector to watch out for his ships.

Colin smiled to himself. Admiral Percival's only hope of defeating his force was to bring him to battle with an equal or superior force. That was basic tactics; even Percival had mastered those. Yet… where would Colin strike? Given the sheer number of possible targets, Percival had an impossible task ahead of him; he had only two other superdreadnaught squadrons to cover hundreds of possible targets. Colin could keep dancing around him forever or eventually set an ambush of his own. If Percival didn't ask for help from other sectors, Colin knew, it would be hard for him to stop the rebellion. But then, at the same time, Colin could win battles, but never the war. Sooner or later, he would have to take the fight to Percival's home base, Camelot itself.

An hour later, they gathered in Colin's quarters, the same cabins that had once belonged to Stacy Roosevelt. Reasoning that the rebellion needed funds, Colin had torn out the artworks and most of the decorations, handing them over to Daria to sell onwards. Instead, he'd brought in a handful of comfy chairs and a single drinks dispenser; unlike Stacy, he didn't need an army of servants taking care of him. The servants, Colin had been amused to discover, had

volunteered as a body to join the rebellion and had gone into the personnel pool. Without Stacy's taste in interior design, the quarters were palatial, large enough for Colin to feel as if he were rattling around inside the rooms. They felt so empty.

The admirals, Colin knew, were either so full of themselves that they felt as if they deserved such quarters for their own — even though Colin could have installed an entire company of Marines in the compartments — or kept a mistress in their private living space. Colin couldn't do either, at least not until the rebellion was underway. He'd just have to endure using the quarters, although he intended to seal off most of the rooms and forget them. A single bed and bathroom was all that he needed. Converting the day room into a meeting room had been easy enough. Percival, of course, would never have allowed those he considered his inferiors into his quarters.

"I'm afraid that she does have a point," Anderson said, once they had passed through the discussion concerning security and the number of people who had volunteered to join the rebellion. He'd warned that many of them might be Imperial Intelligence agents, something Colin understood, but could do nothing about — at least, not yet. Stacy Roosevelt's files hadn't included the names and identities of the spies scattered along the Rim. "What *is* going to replace the Empire?"

Colin rubbed his forehead. His own carelessness was coming back to bite him, hard. He'd been so focused on gaining control of a sizable fleet — and avoiding the attention of Imperial Intelligence or the Security Division — that he hadn't given much thought to what was coming afterwards. When he'd thought about it, he'd thought about cleaning up the Imperial Navy, destroying the patronage system and ensuring that talent — not birth and connections — was used as a guide for promotion.

But Hester had been right. After his meeting with her, he'd been approached by representatives from many other groups… and they had all wanted to know what was coming after the Empire. A group of Unreformed Marx — refugees from the Marx Systems, overrun by the Empire centuries ago — had insisted that the Empire become communist, a word Colin had to look up in the secured files. Other visitors had opposed that suggestion quite vigorously, putting forward their own ideas. Colin was starting to understand why the Rim and the millions of outsiders living there hadn't posed a significant threat to the Empire. They spent their time arguing over what would *replace* the Empire. The thought made him smile. The mice might have just as well voted to replace the cat with a dog — but that still left the problem of getting rid of the cat.

And, it seemed, the weaker the group — and few of them had any

real firepower — the more insistent they were that their views be adopted and heeded. Colin had heard proposals for total freedom — the complete break-up of the Empire, replaced by thousands of independent worlds — to limited reform, or replacing the Empire with another entity that would use the power of the Empire to ensure social reform. The Thousand Families were to be put against the wall and shot, or to be allowed to move peacefully to another world, or even to be allowed to continue as industrial powers. No one seemed to have any coherent plan for the Empire and everyone seemed willing to pick up their toys and go home if their views were not adopted.

Colin would have preferred to forget about the problem, at least until the war was over and the Empire had been defeated, but Hester had pointed out that that was impossible and he had to admit that she was right. They needed to have some rallying call, some reason to fight, if not now then certainly when they announced themselves to the Empire as a whole. And yet, it would have to be chosen carefully. Colin had no love for the current power system, but he understood the value of the Empire and humanity's unity. Breaking up the Empire would shatter the unity that protected the human race.

And then there was the alien question…

"I suppose you could declare yourself Emperor Colin I and invite people to flock to your banner," Daria said. Her face twitched into a smile. "That *would* be traditional for reformers."

"No, thank you," Colin said. The Empire had four monarchs in its history, three Emperors and one Empress. The First Emperor had founded the Empire, only to discover that his fellow aristocrats didn't like the thought of him elevating himself above the rest of them. They'd torn him down and forced him to flee for his life. The Second and Third Emperors had tried to concentrate enough power in their hands to ensure their absolute control, but they'd both been broken down; the sole Empress, too, had vanished under mysterious circumstances. Even Stacy Roosevelt's secure files were vague on the subject. No one outside the Thousand Families knew for sure what had happened. "I don't want to be Emperor."

"It's a dirty job, but someone has to do it," Anderson said, wryly. "How many of those whiners do you want influencing the rebellion?"

"Many of those whiners, as you call them, represent a point of view," Khursheda pointed out, tartly. As a native of Earth, Khursheda had good reason to push for complete reform, even at the cost of breaking up the Empire. "Do you intend to reject their help out of hand?"

"Do they actually have anything to contribute?" Anderson countered. "We have nine superdreadnaughts. How many starships do they have?"

"Some of them have small attack fleets," Daria said, softly. "Others are all talk and no action."

"So we deal with people who can bring assets to the table," Colin said. "There's no point in talking to groups that cannot or will not assist it."

"Except that we will need to rally support from inside the Empire," Daria said, thoughtfully. She glanced across at Mariko, who passed her a datapad. "We will have to reach out to new allies — the various underground movements on occupied planets — and at the same time we have to prevent the Empire from uniting against us. And *that* means trying to break up the unity of the Thousand Families."

Colin scowled. There were certainly billions of people — within the Core Worlds, if not elsewhere — who would have a certain loyalty to the Empire, believing it to be the only hope of humanity. There were even entire worlds along the Rim that worshipped the Imperial Navy, if only because the pirates were worse and the Navy was the only thing standing between them and certain death. They could sneak around the Rim until the heat death of the universe, if necessary, but if they actually wanted to *win* they would eventually have to go after the Core Worlds and face the sheer might of the Empire.

"So what I suggest is this," Daria said. "We put together a Popular Front — call it the Popular Front for Reforming the Empire, or maybe just the Popular Front for Reform. Both of them sound nicely vague. We don't want to make too many promises that we can't or won't keep. As far as the underground organisations along the Rim are concerned, we welcome anyone who wants to join the Popular Front, but once they join they are committed. If they back out, we won't heed their views any longer."

She smiled. "And if there are minor Family members out there, or even Sector Commanders thinking about their own role in a reformed Empire, they are much more likely to get behind a movement to reform the Empire than one to destroy it," she added. "There are quite a few younger members of the Thousand Families who would like their own shot at the golden ring, rather than be forced to bow and scrape to their superiors. There are always opportunists who would be quite happy to jump to us if there was something in it for them."

"That would mean allowing the Thousand Families to have some role in a post-war Empire," Anderson pointed out. "How long would it be before they clawed back their pre-war power?"

"It would not be a significant problem," Salgak buzzed. The Geek seemed unmoving, inhumanly still; even his lips didn't move. "The Thousand Families are dependent upon their control of the Empire's laws to maintain their monopolies. Should such laws be removed — if

the rule of corruption was replaced by the rule of law — they would be forced to adapt or be destroyed. They have no experience of actual competition against their equals. Their power would eventually be broken or forced into more… constructive channels."

"You're talking about a hell of a gamble," Anderson pointed out. "What happens if you are wrong?"

"We have run thousands of thousands of calculations," the Geek stated, flatly. "If the Thousand Families were to be destroyed, the result would be economic chaos. The entire system that maintains the Empire would collapse. Trillions of humans would starve; entire worlds would be instantly impoverished. The Imperial Navy would be scattered and fall into the hands of petty warlords. It would be a disaster beyond calculation. The Empire would be replaced, not by a universe of freedom and liberty, but by a new dark age."

Daria nodded, soberly. "We can reduce the power of the Thousand Families gradually, or replace them slowly," she said. "Destroying them all at once will result in chaos."

"Assuming that people know that," Khursheda said. "It is my observation that people generally cannot see past the end of their own noses. We cannot realistically expect factory workers in a poorly-run factory to continue working for the Thousand Families even after we have overthrown the Empire. I'm sure that keeping them in bondage would be good for the Empire as a whole, but they're not going to see it that way."

"True," Daria said. "Do you have another suggestion?"

"We break up their combines," Khursheda said. "The factory workers get the factories they work in; the Thousand Families can go to a penal world and remain stuck down on the surface for the rest of their worthless lives."

"That would guarantee that the Families would unite against us," Daria said, sharply. "I submit to you that having the Empire united is not in our interests."

"We could always wait until we win," Anderson pointed out. "Once we win, we can take whatever steps we like."

Colin tapped the table and they fell silent. "We cannot make too many promises now," he said, "but we do have to form a political group." He looked up at Daria. "You and Hester can draw up the charter for the Popular Front while we're at Garstang, one that will allow us to appeal to both rebel groups and forces still within the Empire. Our goal will be to reform the Empire, including granting first-rank status to all worlds, rather than to destroy it completely. That will ensure that every world has a say in Parliament."

"Of course," Daria said. She smiled up at him. "You do realise that not everyone will think that that goes far enough?"

“I know,” Colin said. “I think, however, that we have a war to win before we can make any real promises. Don’t you?”

He tapped the display, bringing up the star chart. “Once we have returned from the penal world, we will sign the charter and then start the war against the Empire,” he continued. “A couple of successful strikes against Admiral Percival will allow us to announce ourselves through the ICN and see how many other rebellions and mutinies we can spark off. And, after that, who knows?”

“They will already have taken precautions against other mutinies,” Anderson said, softly. “And if a planet dares to rebel, now, they will be crushed. Percival won’t allow any challenge to his authority to go unpunished.”

Colin nodded. “All we can do is give them hope,” he said, softly. “And that, really, is all they need. Once we defeat Admiral Percival and liberate the sector, we should have new allies, willing to join us in our war.”

“Which leads neatly to the final issue,” Daria said. “What about Jackson’s Folly?”

Colin winced. By his most optimistic calculations, Admiral Percival would have dispatched a second fleet to Jackson’s Folly by now, one that wouldn’t be met by a mutinous Observation Squadron. And then…

“There’s nothing we can do for them,” he admitted. He felt a twinge of guilt. The Empire might have decided Jackson’s Folly’s fate as soon as it had stumbled across the world and its daughter colonies, but he’d made their position a great deal worse. “They’re on their own.”

Chapter Twelve

The buzzing of the intercom woke Penny from an uncomfortable sleep.

"Commander Quick to the Flag Bridge, please," it said. "I say again, Commander Quick to the Flag Bridge, please."

Penny scowled as she pulled herself out of bed and reached for her tunic. She wasn't blind to the verbal demotion — there could only ever be one Captain on a starship, so anyone else holding the rank of Captain was normally granted a courtesy promotion to the next rank — or to what it said about Commodore Rupert Brent-Cochrane. Four days with him on the superdreadnaught had been rather fraught; Brent-Cochrane believed that he was going places and that Penny could, somehow, help him accomplish his aim. Penny had no idea why he believed that she could help — his connections were far superior to hers — but there had been several uncomfortable discussions and verbal fencing, all completely pointless.

She checked her appearance in the mirror, running a hand through her long blonde hair to ensure that it stayed in place. At least the bruises had faded away, thanks to a liberal application of quick-heal ointment and painkiller. Penny buttoned up her tunic — silently grateful that she wasn't with Percival and that she could wear a more regular uniform — and checked the pistol she wore on her belt. Ever since the first reports of the mutiny, Percival had insisted that his staff carried weapons, even though the reports had made it clear that the mutiny had been led by senior officers, officers like her.

The thought made her smile, humourlessly, as she walked through the hatch and out into Officer Country. There was an entire platoon of Blackshirts deployed to protect the officers from their crew — the Marines had been removed from the ship, following the interrogation of the loyalists from Jackson's Folly — and several more companies deployed to keep an eye on the crew. They were already making themselves unpopular. The drug treatments used to render the Blackshirts willing to commit the most horrific atrocities in the name of the Empire also damaged their sense of good behaviour, as if anyone who willingly joined the Blackshirts had any sense of decency in the first place. There had been nine rapes, four beatings — for no real reason Penny could see — and at least one murder. If the crew of the *General Winston* hadn't been feeling mutinous before, Penny knew, it sure as hell was feeling mutinous now.

She passed another Blackshirt as she reached the Flag Bridge, holding up her indent for him to inspect before he waved her through, into the compartment. It was buzzing with life; Brent-Cochrane,

whatever his other faults, was a fairly competent commander. Unlike Stacy Roosevelt, he had rather more than two brain cells to rub together, even though there were rumours of perversions in his private life that put even Percival in the shade. The Commodore nodded to her as she entered, but didn't move away from the display. The superdreadnaught squadron was only two light years from Jackson's Folly.

Penny found her seat and sat down, matching his studied rudeness with studied unconcern. The terminal she wore at her waist bleeped as she pulled it out of her belt, having finished running the search program while she was asleep. Percival hadn't been very forthcoming about Commander Walker, but Penny had access to the secured files and had used her terminal to make enquires. Commander Walker had been royally screwed by Percival — not in the same sense, part of her mind joked, as she was royally screwed — and now he was out for revenge. It wasn't unknown for senior officers to have 'accidents' at the hands of junior crewmen who felt slighted in some way, but she had to admit that Commander Walker had found a hell of a way to get back at his superior. Percival would be very lucky if his career survived the mutiny. He'd certainly never be trusted with such responsibility ever again.

It had occurred to her — she had carefully not mentioned it to Percival, although he would think of it himself soon enough — that the Empire could bring pressure to bear on the families of the mutineers. Her search program revealed that it wasn't going to be that easy. According to Imperial Intelligence, Commander Walker's family had died a long time ago and he hadn't even been back to his homeworld for the funeral. That wasn't uncommon — the sheer size of the Empire meant that the notification might not arrive until the funeral was over — yet Walker had never even applied for leave to go home. There were other, more promising, possibilities, but Penny suspected that they too would be useless. The rebels had to know that the Empire wouldn't show them any mercy.

"Prepare for jump," Brent-Cochrane said, bringing her back to reality. He'd pushed his ships to the limit rushing to Jackson's Folly, as if he expected to find the mutineers still present in the system. He'd also brought along three squadrons of heavy cruisers, one squadron of battlecruisers and five squadrons of destroyers, enough to destroy the entire rebel fleet if they encountered it. Penny doubted that they would be that lucky, but at least Brent-Cochrane had considered the possibility. "On my mark… *flicker*!"

Penny's chest heaved as the starship jumped two light years, appearing two light minutes from Jackson's Folly. Brent-Cochrane had decided, given that there was no way to know just what was

happening on Jackson's Folly, that it would be wiser not to jump in right on top of the planet. The gravity well would certainly scatter his formation when they arrived, something that would be disastrous if the rebels were still present and on the ball. The display lit up, revealing the existence of the planets — *as if someone could have stolen them*, she mocked herself — but little else. They were too far from the planet to pick up starships orbiting it at once.

"Launch probes," Brent-Cochrane ordered. A shell of sensor probes spun out around the starships, watching for signs of cloaked ships trying to sneak towards the formation. A second formation plunged ahead of the ships, heading down towards Jackson's Folly. "Helm… you are cleared to take us in towards the planet."

"Yes, sir," the helmsman said. The remainder of the fleet would be slaved to his console, a heady sensation for such a young officer. Judging by his features, he was connected to the Thousand Families, marking time until he was promoted to a position more befitting his origins. Penny felt a harsh surge of jealousy. *He* would never have to whore himself for promotion. "The fleet is underway."

The display updated rapidly as active sensors scoured space, hunting for targets. Penny had seen the records from the Observation Squadron, but she hadn't really understood just how industrialised Jackson's Folly was, even if its technology was less advanced than the Empire's technology. Hundreds of asteroids were emitting into space, suggesting mining and settlement operations, while cloudscoops orbited the larger gas giant, sucking in the raw lifeblood of interstellar commerce. The planet itself was surrounded by dozens of industrial stations, while its two moons had their own installations. And then there were the thirteen daughter colonies in different star systems. For a planet which had only been effectively colonised for seven hundred years, the people of Jackson's Folly had nothing to be ashamed of. If they'd had a few hundred more years… it might have been them, not the Empire, making decisions about their future.

She shook her head as newer icons, red ones, blinked into life. Jackson's Folly had worked hard to build up a defence since they'd first heard that the Empire was expanding towards them, but it hadn't been enough. Thirty-one battleships were coming to life, escorted by over two hundred smaller ships and covered by orbital weapons platforms… yet she knew that they couldn't stand against the Empire. Brent-Cochrane's fleet fanned out into a formation that both protected the superdreadnaughts and uncovered them, allowing them to fire at will.

"Open a channel," Brent-Cochrane ordered. He waited for the communication's officer's nod. "Attention, Jackson's Folly. By determination of the Supreme Court of the Empire, you are heirs to

the debt incurred by your founders, a debt of over two hundred trillion credits. You are ordered to pay this debt at once or your systems will be repossessed. You have five minutes from receipt of this message to respond."

He drew a finger over his throat, severing the channel. It would take at least ninety seconds for the message to reach Jackson's Folly, and then there was no way of knowing how long it would take them to respond. Penny wondered if Brent-Cochrane had any idea of the absurdity of his words, or if Jackson's Folly had known the sheer size of the judgement against them. It wouldn't have mattered anyway, she knew; if they'd paid up, the Empire would just have looked for other demands until they'd found something that Jackson's Folly literally could not give them. It wouldn't have been hard.

"Commodore," the tactical officer reported, "the enemy formation is forming up."

Penny studied the display. Given their weakness in missile throw weights, the enemy ships had clearly decided to remain in orbit and coordinate with the planetary defence systems, rather than come out to fight. She couldn't blame them, although it was a risky tactic; a shipkiller missile could slip through the orbital weapons platforms and crash into the planet, causing considerable devastation. She could hear some of the officers muttering about cowards who refused to fight, but what had they expected? Jackson's Folly's defenders to come out throw themselves on the Imperial Navy's guns?

"No response, sir," the communications officer said.

"Open a channel," Brent-Cochrane ordered, sharply. He had clearly decided to forget diplomacy, or whatever passed for it in the Empire. "Attention; you are ordered to stand down your shields and weapons and prepare to be boarded. There will be no further warnings."

The tactical display lit up sharply as new red strobes of light flickered into existence. "Commodore, we are picking up tactical sensors," the tactical officer said. He sounded tense, almost worried. "We're being scanned and pinned down."

"Unsurprising," Brent-Cochrane growled. "Do they have any surprises? Are they using any unexpected technology in their scans?"

"The scans are mil-grade, sir," the tactical officer said. "I think they're from a Mark-CI sensor node, probably from a decommissioned Imperial Navy vessel. It's certainly more advanced than we were told to expect."

Brent-Cochrane shrugged. "Even if they have equal weapons to us," he said, as his fleet rumbled onwards towards its target, "it won't make a difference."

He looked up at the display. "Target weapons," he ordered. In

three minutes, they would be at extreme range. Penny could see how his mind was working. That deep in the gravity well, Jackson's Folly's defenders would be unable to flicker out and escape. The smaller ships might be able to escape — although they'd risk burning out their drives — but the battleships could be destroyed quickly and brutally. "Prepare to fire."

Penny counted down the seconds as they moved towards a line on the display, the precise moment when they would be able to open fire. It seemed so *slow* on the display, even though they were moving through space at speeds an earlier generation would have found unimaginable. It was weird, when it was possible to cross light-years in a split second, yet she couldn't blame the Commodore. Ambitious sadist though he might be, at least Brent-Cochrane had the sense to be careful when dealing with the unknown.

"Weapons locked on target," the tactical officer said. "I am getting updated telemetry from the drones. The defenders are moving to enhance their position."

"No need to give them the time," Brent-Cochrane said. The starships had reached weapons range. "You are authorised to open fire."

The superdreadnaught shook as it unleashed its first barrage of missiles. A moment later, the other superdreadnaughts followed suit, emptying their external racks into space. The missiles formed up, guided by their onboard computers, and roared towards the defences. The defenders started to return fire, a counter-attack that looked impressive until Penny saw the underlying data from the drones. Jackson's Folly had missiles, all right, but they were both larger and slower than the Imperial Navy's missiles. The mutineers hadn't taken the time to transfer any of their stocks to the defenders.

She pushed the thought of oncoming death out of her mind. She'd studied the records downloaded to her just before they'd departed Camelot and it was clear, in hindsight, that *something* had been wrong with the Observation Squadron. They'd requested enough supplies from Camelot to allow them to function independently for at least five years, including both weapons and spare parts. That alone should have tipped off Imperial Intelligence, but Captain-Commodore Howell had signed off on the requests, his name alone ensuring that no one would take too close a look at them. The Roosevelt Family's determination to secure Jackson's Folly for their private use had, ironically, contributed to the mutiny's success. It wasn't something that she could suggest to Percival, not when he too was dependent on the Roosevelt Family for his patronage. He would be more likely to turn on her.

"Impact in twenty seconds," the tactical officer said. "The enemy

point defence is engaging our missiles."

Penny watched, a helpless observer, as the defenders opened fire. It was immediately clear that their point defence was far better than the Empire had believed, but that it wasn't anything like enough. She suspected — it would be impossible to prove it, at least immediately — that they had removed all the cut-outs the Empire had built into their datanets, allowing a far greater degree of coordination. Even if they hadn't built additional starships, they might have had enough… if they'd had more point defence. As it was, the torrent of missiles simply overwhelmed the defenders and started to slam home. One by one, the starships of the Jackson's Folly Defence Force were systematically destroyed.

Their own desperate attempt to strike back at the Empire failed almost at once. Their missiles ran into the combined point defence of eighty starships, bound together by the most sophisticated datanet that the Empire could produce. The missiles were scythed down, only a handful surviving to make it through the defences and slam against starship hulls. They might have had better luck if they had aimed at the smaller ships, but they'd concentrated on the superdreadnaughts and their shields could easily handle the impacts. Nuclear fire blossomed against the darkness of space and then faded away, leaving the shields unharmed. Nothing, not even a tiny erg of energy, leaked through the shields to scar the hull.

The main body of the defenders might have been destroyed, but many orbital weapons platforms were still intact, firing desperately towards the Imperial Navy starships — as if they could somehow ward them off. Brent-Cochrane ordered a second salvo fired, although this one was more restrained. Some of the orbital weapons platforms were mounted on asteroids and accidentally de-orbiting one would cause a disaster. The Roosevelt Family would not be happy. They'd certainly see to it that Brent-Cochrane was never given any other responsible command in his entire career. The irony wasn't lost on Penny as one by one the remaining platforms were rapidly destroyed.

"Launch the assault sleds," Brent-Cochrane ordered. Normally, assaulting and securing the orbital industrial nodes would be a Marine responsibility, but with Marine loyalties uncertain, the task had been given to the Blackshirts instead. Penny suspected that most of them were going to die in the assaults, yet she knew the Empire's view; there were always plenty more Blackshirts where they came from. They were recruited from the poorest of colony worlds or Earth's undercity, before being indoctrinated into the Security Division. "I want those facilities secured now."

Penny shrugged, sitting back in her chair and watching with polite interest. A handful of positions on the ground were firing on the

fleet — ground-based defences were rare in the Empire, officially because it would expose the civilian population to enemy counter-fire — and they were rapidly destroyed by KEWs dropped by the fleet. The civilian population down below would be terrified, wondering what was going to happen to them when the Empire finally started to land its occupation force. Penny hoped that most of them had the sense to get out of the cities and remain away from the Blackshirts. They were not known for being gentle occupiers.

"Shit," someone snapped. Penny looked up just in time to see one of the asteroid facilities disintegrate in a towering explosion. The sheer size of the explosion suggested that someone had touched off a nuke, rather than allow the facility to fall into the Empire's hands. "Sir, the facility has been…"

"Destroyed," Brent-Cochrane snarled. Penny smiled inwardly. There went that bonus from the Roosevelt Family. "Order the remaining facilities to be secured, quickly."

Somewhat to Penny's disappointment, the remaining facilities weren't rigged to blow when the Blackshirts occupied them. The few remaining Jackson's Folly personnel were taken prisoner and transferred to one of the troop ships until facilities could be found for them on the surface of the planet. Brent-Cochrane watched from his own chair as the high orbitals were ruthlessly secured and the debris destroyed or tipped into the planet's atmosphere, where it burned up harmlessly. There were no remaining shots from the planet's surface.

"Land the landing force," Brent-Cochrane ordered, calmly. The first assault boats separated from the transports and headed down towards the planet's surface. The Commodore himself strode over to Penny and placed his hand on her shoulder, hard enough to hurt. "You'll be able to report to the Admiral that we succeeded, of course. Jackson's Folly is ours."

"Of course," Penny agreed, keeping her voice even. On the other hand, if the Commodore's fleet were to be drawn away, the rebels would be able to liberate Jackson's Folly. How long would the world remain occupied then? "Was there ever any doubt about the final outcome?"

Chapter Thirteen

"Anything to report, Lieutenant?"

Lieutenant Adam looked up as Commander Fox entered the compartment. "Nothing, sir," he said. "Nothing to report… just as there was nothing to report every day for the past few months. There was nothing at all."

Fox scowled at him. The Imperial Navy might have been responsible for maintaining the security of the various penal worlds throughout the Empire, but they were hardly going to waste competent or well-connected officers on the position. The penal worlds served as a dumping ground in more ways than one, with a joke running through the crews that if they screwed up again it was only a very short flight to their final and permanent posting. And, if the commanding officer wasn't feeling generous, they wouldn't be given a parachute or a drop capsule.

The Garstang System was officially off-limits to all civilian starships, but from time to time starships used it as a rendezvous point or a recovery location if their drives started to show signs of trouble. The Imperial Navy stations in the system didn't usually bother to waste time tracking down the intruders, because there was nothing of value in the remainder of the system. As long as they didn't try to breach the security stations surrounding the planet itself, Fix didn't give a damn. It wasn't as if he cared enough to waste time patrolling a handful of dead worlds. The system didn't even have a gas giant or an asteroid field.

"Very good," he said, finally. He'd managed the remarkable feat of nearly crashing his starship into another ship, disaster only being averted by quick thinking on the part of the ship's commanding officer. He'd half-expected the Captain to execute him on the spot, but instead the Captain had promoted him and sent him to the penal world. It hadn't taken long for Fox to realise that it was, in effect, a life sentence. The promotion was meaningless outside the system itself. "You stand relieved."

Adam threw him a sloppy salute and headed out of the compartment, passing through the secured hatches and down into the interior of the station, while Fox settled himself down in the command chair. Standard Operating Procedure — SOP — insisted that at least three officers be on watch duty at any given time, but he just didn't have the manpower to follow SOP to the letter; besides, it wasn't as if they were a front-line station. His crew might be the Imperial Navy's cast-offs and rejects, but he trusted them not to screw up too badly. Besides, he hadn't been joking when he'd warned that some

transgressions would result in the offender being dumped on the planet below.

Garstang had been an odd planet when the Imperial Navy had discovered it, a desert world orbiting a variable star. A runaway greenhouse effect combined with the occasional radiation bombardment from the local primary had resulted in a nearly-dead world with low levels of oxygen, habitable only to heavily-engineered settlers. The terraforming crews had, instead, dumped a massive biological packet on the planet's surface and gone away to leave it to ferment. All of their computer models, they'd claimed afterwards, had said that the planet should have become a more habitable world. Ironically, they'd succeeded beyond their wildest dreams.

The terraforming crews hadn't realised — or had professed not to realise, as there were billions of credits wrapped up in every terraforming mission — that Garstang wasn't anything as close to dead as they had thought. The tiny signs of life on the planet's surface — hardened lichen and comparable plant-like life forms — were only the tip of the iceberg. Deep underground, other forms of life struggled for survival, perfectly adapted to their environment. The sudden infusion of higher levels of oxygen and Earth-based forms of life provided a massive boost to the natives and, over seventy years, the planet flourished. Forms of animal life that had lived deep underground came up to the surface, where they established themselves as part of a new ecosystem. The entire planet had been reshaped. It was also unrelenting hostile to uninvited guests.

After the first attempt to plant a colony on the surface of the planet had failed miserably, the Ministry of Settlement had given up and converted the world into a penal colony. Every month, the freighters would arrive, carrying the human waste of the Empire — everything from rebels to murderers and paedophiles. The convicts were given a small amount of survival equipment, loaded into drop capsules — accompanied by their families, if they chose to accept permanent exile — and shot down to the surface. What they did after that, as far as the Empire was concerned, was their own affair. If they tamed the planet, the Empire could put in a garrison and take over; if they all died, the Empire had been saved the cost of an execution. Even criminals could be made to service the Empire.

The thought made Fox smile, because there *were* some benefits to serving on the orbiting platforms. Once they realised where they were going, convicts — particularly female convicts — became desperate to escape. There were no less than thirty female convicts on the orbiting platform, doing everything from cooking and cleaning to entertaining the prison guards. If any of them displeased the guards, or refused to do whatever they were asked, they could be transported down to the

planet's surface and abandoned. Indeed, they would eventually have to be sent down anyway, for they had all been sentenced to death. The Empire might start asking questions if they were found away from the system. It was a shame, Fox considered, for some of the guards were genuinely fond of their whores, but there was no help for it. If they hadn't wanted to be sent to a penal world and abandoned, they wouldn't have committed the crimes in the first place.

He leaned back and stared at the display. It was blank, of course; there was nothing else within the system, at least nothing emitting anything the array of passive sensors surrounding the planet could detect. He had sometimes wondered if there was a black colony hidden within the system — perhaps down on the planet itself — yet if there was, it would be very good at hiding. And besides, Fox didn't care. They didn't pay him enough to give a damn about black colonies or the many thousands of others who wished to hide from the Empire.

A *ping* emitted from the tactical console and he looked up sharply. Every month, the bulk freighters arrived, carrying their convicts… but few others visited the system. They might have been warned to remain alert, for fear that someone would try to liberate the convicts, yet no threat had ever materialised. No rebel group possessed the firepower to break into the system and recover prisoners from the planet's surface, not even the legendary Captain Cordova. It was probably a freighter having drive problems, or an Imperial Navy warship come to call. His face twisted into a smile. The last time a warship had passed through the system, they'd had a great time.

He keyed the console and scowled as the icon popped up in front of him. It wasn't a warship, but a bulk freighter; an old one, judging by the weird curves in its drive systems. The sensors insisted that its flicker drive was breaking down, although Fox couldn't see any signs of it himself. Years ago, when he had been a promising naval officer, he'd been told that any jump where all the pieces appeared in the right order was a good jump; this freighter crew appeared to have been lucky. After all, their ship was intact.

And they shouldn't be in the system at all, he reminded himself. His grin grew wider as he considered the bribes he could extract from the crew, in exchange for not revealing their visit to higher command. The Sector Commander would be very suspicious of any freighter that went into a restricted system without authorization. He might even issue a warrant for the crew to be hunted down and arrested as rebels. Who knew — perhaps the ship included some young and attractive female crewmembers.

He tapped the console and sent a standard challenge to the freighter. It was unlikely that the freighter posed any kind of threat — freighters weren't warships, no matter how many weapons the foolish

or desperate crammed into their hulls — but, just in case, he also sent the activation commands to the weapons platforms. It would at least suggest that he and his crew were on the ball if an inspection mission ever arrived although he'd been stuck on the platform for over ten years and there had never been a single inspection. The penal worlds were out of sight, out of mind; exactly how the Empire liked it.

The image of the freighter grew sharper as his sensors started to ping off its hull. It was terribly damaged, not by pirates, but by age and ill-use. Fox was mildly surprised that it was still intact, even though starships didn't just decay. It looked as if the freighter crew were going to be very poor, which was unfortunate — for them. He was just going to have to do his duty and detain them as possible rebels.

Chuckling to himself, he keyed the intercom and ordered a boarding party. The men wouldn't be too happy at being dragged away from their beds — if nothing else, the orbiting station had enough room for even a lowly crewman to have a large set of quarters — and their whores, but who cared what they thought? Besides, there might even be a reward in it for them.

* * *

"Yep, they've definitely got us," Markus announced.

He looked over at his wife. Carola was young, but her face was already showing signs of age and stress, the same age and stress he knew his own face displayed. Gunboat pilots tended to live fast and die young, an inevitable consequence of the role, and those who survived grew old quickly. Gunboats were the smallest starships in existence — the smallest craft to carry an independent flicker drive — and they were almost defenceless. Even a glancing hit from a rail gun would destroy a gunboat. The Imperial Navy used them as scouts, rating the tiny ships and their crewmen expendable, not something that endeared them to their pilots. Markus, knowing that he was reaching the point where he would be removed from flight duty, hadn't hesitated when he'd been invited to join the rebellion. At least his death would be meaningful.

"And they're getting stroppy," Carola agreed. "They're demanding that we shut down our drives and prepare to be boarded."

Markus grinned at her. While he was the prime pilot, Carola was co-pilot, communications, sensors and tactical officer rolled into one. If they'd been flying a standard mission, he would have been concentrating on evading enemy pursuit and point defence while she concentrated on actually gathering the information the fleet needed.

As it was, they could actually afford to relax. Admiral Walker's grand idea had seen to that.

He glanced down at the tiny console, watching as information flowed across the screen, right in front of him. The files hadn't been too detailed on just how much firepower the Empire had installed to guard the penal world, but as the freighter limped closer to the planet, more and more orbiting weapons platforms came into view. There wasn't enough firepower to deter a superdreadnaught, he was relieved to see, yet there was clearly enough to prevent any of the rebel groups from recovering their people. Judging from the planet itself, Markus couldn't have sworn that any of the rebels would still be alive, or that they could be sorted out from the murderers or rapists or others who had thoroughly deserved the sentence to the penal world. He hoped that the Admiral had found a way of sorting through the convicts, or else their mission was going to be for nothing.

"Keep stalling them," he said. The Imperial Navy officers on the platform were unlikely to be the sharpest pencils in the box. The chances were good that they wouldn't be too worried about a simple bulk freighter, even if the crew balked at being inspected. The Empire wouldn't care if the bulk freighter was rammed right into the planet, causing an impact equivalent to that of a medium-sized asteroid. They'd probably be delighted that all the convicts were dead. "Tell them that we're having major systems failures."

Carola laughed as she removed her earpiece. "They're offering to make our systems failures worse unless we shut down the drives now," she said. "I think they mean it. He's roaring at us and everything."

"What a melodramatic asshole," Markus observed. He keyed a switch, transferring everything the freighter's sensors had picked up into the secure storage node onboard the gunboat. "I'm flash-waking the drive now. Tell them that we're attempting to recycle the flicker drive and shut it down."

A dull hum echoed through the gunboat as the flicker drive came to life. Markus hadn't admitted it — gunboat pilots never showed their fear, not even in front of their lives — but this was the part of the mission that most worried him. The weird energies released by an activated flicker drive couldn't be shielded — or concealed — by anything short of a planet. If they were lucky, the platform would mistake the gunboat's flicker drive for the freighter's drive — the data packet they'd transmitted had warned that the drive was unstable — but if they weren't lucky… actually, there was very little they could do. The bulk freighter might have been within missile range, yet the crew would have plenty of warning.

"They're saying that the drive is clearly unstable and suggest that we abandon ship," Carola said. They shared another grin. Under

Imperial Law, an abandoned ship could be declared salvage and end up the property of whoever recovered it. The Imperial Navy wouldn't want the bulk freighter, yet a *real* freighter crew would have had to pay massive bribes just to recover their ship. The big Family-owned shipping lines saw to that. "They're even offering to send a shuttle to take us off the ship."

"And their time is up," Markus said. He keyed a final set of commands into the main computer. "Jump in three… two… one… *jump*!"

Admiral Walker's idea, Markus had considered, was so simple that he'd wondered why no one had ever thought of it before. Or, perhaps, someone *had* thought of it and decided that it was far too risky to attempt even under strictly controlled conditions. When a starship flickered out, it created a twist in the fabric of time and space, a twist that could be extremely dangerous to anything nearby. Indeed, gunboat pilots were known for waiting around until a missile got close enough to be caught in the effect and flickering out, detonating the missile as they vanished. Flickering out from *inside* a mothership would cause horrific damage to the mothership, to the point where the Imperial Navy hard-coded safety systems to prevent anyone from being stupid enough to try it.

The bulk freighter, however, was expendable. Admiral Walker's crew of Geeks had cut out almost the entire cargo bay section and replaced it with a single bay, with the gunboat positioned in the exact centre. If the freighter survived, it could be recovered and repaired; if not, it was, after all, expendable. When Markus hit the final switch, his gunboat flickered out, the signature of its disappearance being masked by the destabilising freighter drive. It might have been impossible to send a message at FTL speeds, but Admiral Walker's tactic would allow the rebels some improved coordination — if it worked.

Markus swore as the entire gunboat shuddered so hard that he feared it would come apart. One of the dangers of the tactic had been that parts of the freighter would be sucked into the twist with them and wind up slamming against the gunboat's hull. A second danger, a far more likely one, was that the mass of the freighter would randomly affect the jump, sending them to the wrong location or burning out the drives. Markus had used five years of experience to program the jump, along with the most sophisticated computers the Empire could produce, and even he was nervous. He would never have admitted it, of course.

"Success," Carola proclaimed. The gunboat was tumbling wildly — the artificial gravity seemed to be fading away, suggesting that there was more damage they couldn't detect — but they were

alive. “We are in the right location.”

Markus laughed as the display lit up with IFF signals. Admiral Walker’s fleet was waiting for them. “Start uploading the data,” he ordered. He checked the damage-control system, which was covered in red lights. “And then tell them that we need a pick-up.”

* * *

Fox blinked in surprise as the entire freighter started to disintegrate. His first response was irritation — the freighter’s spokeswoman had sounded attractive and desperate — but as he studied the sensors, he found himself puzzled. There seemed to be no valid reason for the starship to disintegrate. It wasn’t unknown for a very badly tuned flicker drive to start weakening the vessel’s structure, but any freighter crew worth their salt would have known to watch for and avoid that. It looked almost as if they had tried to flicker out, only to have the drive fail spectacularly.

“Get the shuttle out there,” he ordered. His crew had, at least, responded quickly, even though they’d grumbled a great deal. He couldn’t really blame them. Savaging a bulk freighter — its manifest had stated that it was carrying farming tools, rather than anything interesting — wasn’t an easy task, even if the freighter was intact. As it was, it looked as if a single misjudgement could cause a disaster. “I want…”

He broke off as new red icons spangled into existence on the display. “Holy shit!”

Chapter Fourteen

"Jump completed, sir," the helmsman reported.

"Enemy tactical sensors are scanning us," the tactical officer added. "I think they can't believe their eyes."

Colin smiled. He knew how *he* would have reacted if he'd been in command of the base and had suddenly seen nine superdreadnaughts and over a hundred smaller ships bearing down on him. It was possible that the Imperial Navy crewmen would believe that they were legitimate starships on a legitimate mission, but he'd decided not to try to use the fake IFF signals. The Geeks swore blind that Colin's fleet would be able to pretend to be either of Percival's remaining superdreadnaught squadrons, yet Colin wanted to hide that capability until they hit a far harder target than Garstang.

The planet grew in the main display as his fleet headed towards the network of orbital weapons platforms surrounding the penal world. It didn't look *healthy*, not to Colin's eyes, a sign of a world at war with itself. Unlike most marginally-habitable worlds, Garstang's native ecology had proven itself able to fight the infusion of Earth-native plants and animals, creating a nightmarish environment for the unwilling colonists. Eventually, it would settle down into a balanced position — the terraforming crews had been certain of that — but for the moment it made an ideal penal world. Colin couldn't keep his eyes off it. If his rebellion failed, most of his crew would be sentenced to a penal world, although he himself would be publically executed. The Empire would never show mercy to his men.

"They're hailing us," the communications officer said. "They're asking what we're doing here."

Colin's lips twitched. Admiral Percival clearly hadn't warned the penal colony that nine superdreadnaughts had fallen into enemy hands, or that they might be raided by rebel forces. The Imperial Navy crew on the platforms had to know that something was wrong — the fleet bearing down on them included some very non-standard starships — yet they might not realise just how badly they were screwed. His lips tightened into a humourless smile. A single salvo of missiles from his fleet would utterly destroy the planet's defences and allow him to recover as many of the prisoners as he could without any fear of being interrupted.

Provided, of course, that we can find that picket ship, he thought, sourly. The superdreadnaught's massive arrays of tactical sensors were probing space — there was no point in trying to hide — but they hadn't located the picket ship. Colin wasn't too surprised. As long as the crew was careful, they could just keep their heads down, power up

their own flicker drive and jump out. The thought was bleakly amusing. Where could they go to get reinforcements capable of taking on nine superdreadnaughts? There was only one place they could go — Camelot — and that was several days away.

"Open a channel," he ordered. "This is Admiral Walker of the Shadow Fleet."

He smiled, knowing how the enemy crewmen would be reacting. The Shadow Fleet was a legend, even though Colin suspected that the Popular Front — or whatever they ended up calling themselves — wouldn't want to keep the name. Still… he could use it for the moment and, with any luck, it would serve to confuse the enemy.

"You are ordered to surrender at once," he continued. "If you comply with all of our orders, you will not be harmed. Deactivate the planetary defence grid. Do not attempt to purge your computers or activate any destruct systems. You have one minute from this message to comply."

He leaned back in his command chair and waited for the seconds to tick away. Purging a starship's computers would make it hard to use the ship, at least until the computers could be rebooted and reprogrammed, but it was hardly fatal. The computers on the orbital platform, on the other hand, were vitally important. They contained the records of who had been sent to where on the planet's surface. It didn't take much imagination to realise that searching an entire planet — a planet with no technology that could be detected from orbit — was not going to be an easy task. Colin knew that it would take years to accomplish and there was no way he could keep his fleet in one place that long. It would be easier to contact Percival and offer to surrender.

"Target the automated platforms," he ordered. There were thirty seconds before they deadline ran out. "Prepare to fire."

* * *

"I'm seeing things," Lieutenant Adam burbled. He stank of alcohol and sparkle dust. It wasn't forbidden when off duty — and forbidding it wouldn't have been very effective in any case — but Fox felt a twinge of disgust. "They're a figment of my imagination."

"You have no imagination," Fox snarled at him. He'd wondered if his sensors had been having flights of fancy when the superdreadnaughts arrived, but every sensor told the same story. The wreckage of the bulk freighter had been forgotten as the superdreadnaughts ploughed their way towards his station. Their blocky ugly image — the very picture of a blunt instrument — was

now displayed on all of his consoles. Their tactical scans were so powerful that they were threatening to blind some of his more sensitive sensors. “Inject yourself with a cleanser and then take the tactical console.”

He ignored Adam’s fumbling in the compartment’s medical dispenser as he stared at the superdreadnaughts, his mind racing. What was he to do? A tactical genius like Admiral Joshua Wachter could not have pulled a victory from the jaws of defeat, not with nine superdreadnaughts bearing down on him. The defences hadn’t been designed to stand up to anything heavier than an assault cruiser. If he surrendered, the Empire would not be happy with him and he might find himself the latest convict on the planet’s surface; if he fought, the results would be certain death. It didn’t take a simulation to tell him that any fighting could only have one result.

“Answer them,” Adam said. Fox looked up with a snap. The seconds had been ticking away while he’d been frozen by his own thoughts. “Tell them that we surrender!”

The naked panic in his voice disgusted Fox, yet he understood; to his shame, there was nothing else they could do, but surrender. Adam might have been a coward — it was why he had been sent to the penal world’s orbiting station in the first place — yet he was right. Fox might have fought if there had been a hope of victory, but that hope was simply non-existent. A single superdreadnaught would have rolled over his station — probably without even having its paint scratched — and then liberated the prisoners anyway. Nine superdreadnaughts would just do it quicker.

He keyed the console. “This is Commander Fox,” he said, calmly. As long as they were talking, there was still a chance that he could game the outcome. “If we surrender, what guarantees do you offer for my men and me?”

There was hardly any pause before the reply, a sign of just how close the superdreadnaughts were to his station. “We will guarantee that they and you will remain alive,” the voice said. It was as cold and harsh as the winters on an icy world, one far from a warm star. “We make no other promises. Surrender now or die. There will be no further discussions.”

Fox bowed his head. At least they would live… if the speaker chose to keep his word. It was tempting to believe that he wouldn’t, but he knew that if they fought, they died. There really was no other choice.

“Deactivate the defence grid,” he ordered Adam, who was already standing by the tactical console. He flicked a switch and linked back into the communications system. “We surrender; I say again, we surrender. The defence grid is deactivated.”

"Good," the voice said. "Armed Marines are on their way. I strongly advise you to comply with their orders and do nothing to *irritate* them."

"I understand," Fox said, caught between fear and puzzlement. Armed *Marines*? Who *were* these people? They couldn't be the Shadow Fleet. Even at its height, the Shadow Fleet of legend had never included superdreadnaughts, or the Empire would have taken it a great deal more seriously. The only thing he could think of was that it might be a security test, yet why would they bother? It made no sense to him at all. "We will comply."

He switched the channel again, connecting him to the other stations on his platform. "We are going to be boarded," he said, flatly. "You are ordered to comply with their *requests*" — he didn't want to say *orders* — "as far as possible. They have promised that they will leave us alive as long as we cooperate. That is all."

Fox sat down in his command chair and waited to see what would happen. On the display, the defence grid had gone completely off-line, but the newcomers weren't taking any chances. They were keeping their shields up and their weapons ready to deal out death to anyone who interfered with them, while shuttles were being launched towards the station, following an evasive pattern that looked vaguely familiar. The speaker had talked about Marines, he recalled, and the shuttle pilots were flying Marine-standard flight patterns…

He just didn't know what to make of it. Who *were* these people?

* * *

"Ugly station," Colonel Neil Frandsen muttered, as his shuttle flew right towards the orbital platform. The Empire hadn't bothered to invest much love in the design; it was a boxy platform, covered with airlocks and launching tubes for transport pods. It even *looked* old, as if the workers couldn't be bothered painting it properly before completing the assembly and releasing it into orbit. But then, hardly anyone was expected to see it. No one cared about the opinions of the convicts, the Imperial Navy personnel on duty would be the dregs of the system and the rest of the Empire wouldn't be permitted in the system. "Take us right towards the VIP entrance."

The pilot chuckled as the shuttle levelled out and arrowed towards an airlock near the top of the boxy platform. Neil watched, unconcerned, as they passed deactivated weapons stations, each one only requiring the touch of a button to bring it to life again. The station's crew could kill thirty Marines, if they opened fire, but then the fleet outside would reduce the station to flaming debris, all of

which would fall into the planet's atmosphere and probably set off another environmental change.

He keyed his suit's radio. "Commander Fox, you will assemble your command crew in the main compartment," he ordered. "Any officer or crewman found out of place will be unceremoniously shot."

"We understand," Fox's voice said. Neil's expression twisted with disgust at the whining sound. Fox sounded very much as if he would like to fight, yet didn't quite dare to open fire — or, for that matter, to purge the computers and trigger the self-destruct. "We will comply."

A dull thump echoed through the shuttle as the pilot brought her in to dock with the airlock. Neil checked the computers and was relieved to discover that Marine-grade incursion software was capable of inserting itself into the station's computers and subverting them. It was a pity that such systems couldn't be used without a physical link into the computers, but the Empire — paranoid about the Geeks and Nerds — had constructed the systems to avoid such intrusions. It wouldn't have mattered. If worst came to worst, Neil and his men could have burned right through the station's hull and vented it into space, while they were secure in their armoured suits.

The airlock hissed open and Neil marched right in, ignoring the half-hearted protests from two of the younger Marines. Admiral Walker might be too important to risk, Neil knew, but the day a Marine became too important to risk was the day that he needed to resign. His own actions after his relief, he understood now, had been more about getting himself killed than about doing anything constructive. The Marines had understood. Few others would have been that understanding, or sympathetic.

He glanced from side to side as he moved through the corridor and into the control section. It was smaller than he had expected, but then, the Imperial Navy hadn't bothered to spend large sums on a penal planet station. There were more important places to spend money on, such as senior officers' quarters or luxuries for the Thousand Families. Commander Fox looked exactly as Neil had pictured him, a young man with an old face. His record suggested neither competence nor political connections.

"Secure them," he ordered. He grasped Fox's hands himself, pulling them behind the man's back and wrapping a pair of memory cuffs around them. The metal flowed into place; comfortable, but unbreakable. He waited until the remaining twelve crewmen were subdued before continuing. "Commander Fox; why are there other people on your station, not within this compartment?"

Fox couldn't look into the darkened visor covering Neil's eyes. "You ordered my crew to be brought up to this compartment," he stammered. He had to know that Neil could have crushed his neck

using his suit's augmented muscles, even by accident. "The others on this station are not part of my crew."

"Rules lawyer," Neil snarled. Fox looked terrified. A sudden change in his body's heat emissions suggested that he had wet himself. "Who are they?"

"Workers," Fox said, finally. "They're convicts who come to work for us in exchange for safety and food and others and…"

His eyes rolled up in his head and he fainted. Neil shook his head with disgust and lowered him to the floor, dropping him with all the elegance of a sack of potatoes. "Guard them," he ordered the first platoon, and marched out of the compartment without bothering to check if his two bodyguards were accompanying him. He wanted to see for himself. The interior of the station was dull and depression. It surprised him that, even after serving nearly a decade on the station, Commander Fox and his men hadn't bothered to try to make it like home. They might not have been allowed children on their base, yet they could have decorated…

He checked the station's security systems and frowned. All of the remaining life-signs were gathered in one of the cargo bays, so he led his small group there. The station didn't actually store much between convict flights, just in case the convicts somehow managed to get up to the station and take over. The prisoner transports would bring most of their supplies, which would then be distributed by Fox and his men. It was a neat little system, with the slight problem that a few delayed fights and Fox and his crew would start to starve. Their food processors were hardly the latest models.

"In here," he said, as they finally reached the hatch. It wasn't coded shut, but it hardly mattered. Anyone inside the cargo bay — unless they had a powered armour suit of their own — was trapped. There was no other way out, apart from the main hatch which led out into space. "Check the environmental systems and then open the hatch."

He wasn't sure what he expected when he opened the hatch, but what he saw surprised him. There were thirty-seven women within the compartment, all young and stunningly pretty — and naked. Some looked as if they had been the victims of abuse; others looked as if they were cared for, even loved. They all cowered away from the Marines, almost as if they feared the Marines more than their masters. Neil couldn't blame them. Inside the armoured suit, he was just a faceless monster. They couldn't possibly know who or what he was.

It was easy to tell their story. They would have been selected from the female convicts and offered the choice between working on the platform… or being launched down to the surface of the planet in a one-way pod. Neil had worked with Marines ever since he had

joined the Corps and he understood; some of the women looked abused because they *were* abused, others looked unharmed because they had been unharmed. Some of Fox's men would have seen them purely as receptacles for their lust, while others would have allowed themselves to develop emotional attachments to their girls. Who knew — perhaps the girls felt the same way too. It wasn't as if life on the surface of the planet would be much better.

Warning lights flashed up in his HUD and he scowled. He hadn't realised that he was squeezing his own hands so tightly until the alerts sounded, warning them that he might damage his own suit. Part of him wanted to go back to the command section and pop Fox's head like a grape, the other part knew that Fox and his men had merely made the best of a bad posting. There were few who would have resisted temptation.

"Take them to the shuttles," he ordered, finally. He doubted that any of them were truly dangerous. The station's crew would have to be insane to allow a known murderess or serial killer onboard. Of course, given that no one knew how Hester Hyman had escaped from her prison ship, it was possible that someone *had* been that stupid and she'd merely taken advantage of it. "And then secure the remaining station. It's time to start scanning the records."

* * *

"We have all the records downloaded, sir," the communications officer said. "They're being routed to intelligence now."

Colin nodded, shortly. They only had a handful of intelligence officers — Anderson was the most senior — who had volunteered to join the rebellion. They couldn't be trusted in any case; Colin only trusted Anderson because he could have blown the whistle at any time and wrecked the whole plan to mutiny before it had even got off the ground. Still… he'd found some volunteers from Daria's people and, between them, they could start locating the prisoners the underground wanted liberated.

"Good," he said. The Colonel was already returning to his transport ship, leaving a pair of Marines on the station along with the secured prisoners. "Prepare to land the landing force."

Chapter Fifteen

"Good water, yes?"

Simon Alenichev nodded, sipping the water and trying not to edge away from the creature facing him. The crab-like creature, a strange combination of crab and octopus, was equally at home on the land or in the water, but the Garak'Tor preferred to live in the water. There were only a handful of aliens on the penal colony, most of them preferring to keep their distance from the humans, yet he'd managed to make contact with one small colony. They could help each other, even though the aliens touched off every phobia humanity had about insects and underwater monsters.

"Yes," he said. He suspected that the Garak'Tor were actually more intelligent than humans — a few hundred years of difference and it might have been their empire that overran humanity's, rather than the other way around — but they were limited to very basic communication without computers and other high tech. The alien's mouth could barely shape Imperial Standard, while no human could duplicate their language. "It is very good water."

He straightened up and looked around. Two days ago, a flash-flood had roared down the valley, scouring it clear of life. The planet's indomitable wildlife was already starting to reclaim the area, bringing with it the dangerous animals that threatened the lives of everyone on the planet. Only Haven, as far as they knew, was relatively safe from the planet's defenders… and that only through constant patrols and careful precautions. The weather on the planet was unpredictable, to the point where Simon and the other leaders of the small colony feared that one day a powerful storm would destroy their colony and leave them exposed to the planet's wildlife. The Empire had definitely known what it was doing when it sent the involuntary colonists to the planet. It would probably kill them all eventually.

The trade between humans and Crabs — as most humans called them — was based around water and small supplies. The Crabs could tell if water was clean and pure — water bubbled up from great underground reservoirs, sometimes pure and sometimes very unclean — without running the risk of poisoning themselves. Humanity had the only industrial base on the planet, although it was very primitive by the standards of the Empire, allowing them to trade basic weapons and equipment in exchange. He picked up the small bag of swords and other tools, passing it over to the alien, which took it in one clawed hand. Even watching the alien sent a chill down his spine.

"I'll meet you in one week," he said, as the Crab turned and

started to scuttle away, down towards the deeper lake. They had an entire colony underwater, the envy of the humans who watched from the shore, although Simon had a suspicion that the planet's wildlife was attacking their colony with just as much determination as it was attacking Haven. "We'll be waiting…"

He turned and walked away from the shore, careful to stay on the sand that had been deposited there by the flash-flood. The planet's most dangerous wildlife resembled nothing so much as giant snakes, but they seemed to swim through the soil and appear just when they were ready to strike, right underneath their victim. The alert watcher could spot signs of their presence and prepare to stab the snake with a spear as soon as they arrived; the unwary died, often without knowing what had hit them. The Empire had told them that if they tamed the world, they could have it for themselves, but Simon privately doubted that it was possible. It was far more likely that, one day, Haven would fall and the colony would be destroyed. And then there were the crazies.

The Empire hadn't been very discriminating when it unloaded its problem cases onto the planet's surface. Rebels like Simon — he'd led an underground movement that had eventually been broken open by the Empire's security forces — had been shipped to the planet, accompanied by petty criminals, victims of intrigue and outright psychopaths. The criminally insane hadn't thought about cooperating, or about obeying some laws for the greater good; they'd just sought to turn a hellish world into even more of a nightmare. They'd formed roving gangs of bandits, attacking Haven and the handful of other colonies, with no ambition, but destruction. Simon remembered fighting off the last attack, a raid that had threatened to break through Haven's defences, and shivered. One day their luck would run out and Haven would fall.

His walk took him up the stony hill — he suspected that it was a dead volcano — and towards the small town. The defenders had built a wall around their village, a combination of hard wood from the trees that grew on the surface and stone, even a primitive form of cement. It was pitiful compared to what the Empire could have built, but they'd been denied any form of high technology. They'd had to look to the past and develop blacksmiths and gunsmiths, creating weapons and tools that the Empire would have considered laughable. There had been no choice. Without at least some weapons, they were doomed.

He snorted. The Empire had thoughtfully provided them with farming tools and even some seeds. What the Empire hadn't realised — or simply hadn't cared about enough to notice — was that there was little solidity outside Haven. They'd tried to grow crops, but

the native wildlife — or the bandits — destroyed them. Their only source of food was hunting the Earth-native life that had carved out a niche on the planet's surface and the handful of native plants that humans could eat. The native wildlife, typically, was poisonous to humans. The bandits used it to poison their spears.

Simon might have been the elected chief of the village, but his house was no bigger than any other house. He stepped inside — pausing to look at the five metre-long snake skeleton he'd hung on the side of the house, one he'd killed a day after his arrival on the planet — and smiled at his wife. Alice had been a petty criminal when she'd been sentenced to exile and transported to the penal world. Now… there was nothing to steal and she had adapted herself to her new life. None of the settlement's women were ever allowed outside the wall. The bandits, if they caught a woman, would use her dreadfully and then kill her. They were too crazy, driven mad by their environment, to even think about the future.

"Hey," Alice said, with a wave. There were times when he wondered if she was going a little crazy herself — if they were all going a little crazy. "What did the Crabs have to say?"

"The new springs are drinkable," Simon said, shortly. He sat down on a stool and watched his wife, feeling tiredness and despair creeping over him. "And we'd better move quickly to take what we can. There are other humans in the area."

Alice's eyes widened. She'd nearly been captured by bandits when her one-way pod had crashed on the planet's surface. "There are more bandits in the area?"

"No way of knowing," Simon said. "They could have picked up one of our parties and…"

He broke off as a sonic boom echoed out, high overhead. The sound was so unexpected that he thought, just for a moment, that it was thunder. The planet's eerie weather was known for producing weird effects, including a display of thunder and lightning that had resembled a planetary assault underway. The first boom was followed by others, suggesting…

Simon pulled himself to his feet, his wife a second behind him, and ran out of the hut's door. Outside, the watchers, permanently on guard against wildlife or bandits, were staring up towards the sky, where a series of lights were ploughing their way down towards the planet. Simon felt Alice grab his arm as the shuttles turned, heading back towards the settlement, but he was too surprised to respond. It had been made clear to him, during the brief stay on the orbital station, that there would never be any relief. No shuttles would come down to the planet, ever… yet they were here. He felt his mouth opening, but no words emerged. Had the Empire tired of watching

them struggling to survive on the surface of their world, or had they merely decided to bring more criminals to the planet's surface?

The shuttles descended towards the patch of sand to the north of the settlement, away from the lake. Simon heard the mutterings from the watchers and knew what they meant; the shuttles were landing, accidentally or otherwise, right in one of the most unsafe places on the planet. That sand would probably take the shuttles — it wasn't quicksand — yet it was almost certainly infested. The crawlies, or snakes, or great worms would attack them at once. Simon considered shouting a warning, and then changed his mind. If they were from the Empire, who gave a damn what happened to them?

* * *

"Nice place you've brought us to, sir."

"Shut up," Neil said, as he checked his weapons and suit. According to the files that had been extracted from the orbital station, most of the rebels from the various underground movements had been dumped in a handful of locations, along with plenty of criminals and madmen. They'd flown a recon mission over the settlement, yet his most optimistic estimate suggested that the settlement's population would be a thousand at most. If all the settlements had comparable populations… what had happened to the remainder of the rebels?

The shuttle grounded itself in a patch of sand, allowing the Marines to troop down the ramp and onto the ground. Neil was silently grateful that he couldn't *smell* the penal world's atmosphere. The suit's atmospheric monitoring programs reported that there were high concentrations of various gases in the air, not enough to be lethal, but certainly enough to create a foul smell. The sand felt odd under their armoured feet, yet they weren't sinking in it. He led the way towards the settlement — the village — in the distance, wondering why the involuntary colonists hadn't expanded their domain out towards the jungle in the distance. Neil was no expert on geography, yet surely they could have expanded…

A red light flashed up in his HUD, a second before… *something* burst out of the ground and came right at him, jaws opening wide to reveal very sharp, very white teeth. It clamped onto Neil's arm and emitted a howl of pain as its teeth shattered on the armour, although red icons in his HUD warned that the teeth had actually dented the armour, somehow. Neil reached out with his other arm, pulled the creature off his armour and examined it thoughtfully. It was a long snake-like creature, with bulging eyes — he imagined that they looked surprised — and a massive jaw. Neil wouldn't have cared to meet one

of them without his armour. Those teeth could have bitten off a human's head without even noticing. The files on the planet hadn't been very detailed when it came to wildlife and he was starting to understand why. Anyone who went down to catalogue the planet's wildlife probably ended up being eaten by it.

He took the creature's head in one armoured hand and squeezed, hard. The snake's skull popped, like a grape, leaving the remains of its body trashing about in the sand. Neil muttered a command for his Marines to deploy sensors to watch for other creatures, only to recoil in shock when the first results started to come in. The sand might have looked harmless, but underground there were hundreds of creatures, swimming through the sand towards the armoured Marines. There was barely a second's warning before another creature roared up and started to drag a Marine into the sand, before his comrades could rescue him and kill the creature with a burst of plasma fire.

"Run," Neil ordered. An armoured suit could move at nearly a hundred kilometres an hour, at least on flat ground. Newer snakes burst up all around them, only to run into plasma fire as the Marines terminated any threat rapidly and brutally. None of them had served in such an environment before, yet they had adapted quickly; Neil was proud of them, in his own way. "Get up to the village and…"

The moment they stepped onto the stony ground, the attacks faded away and ended, as if they'd never been. Neil looked back towards the sand, where they'd left dead creatures in their wake, only to see nothing. The local wildlife had taken the bodies of the dead and sucked them down under the surface, where he suspected that they would be devoured by their own kind. He checked the sensors and wasn't surprised when they concurred. The alien world seemed to have no place for compassion, or even courage.

He turned back towards the village. "Wait here," he ordered, and started to walk up towards the gates. The settlers should have nothing that could stop an armoured suit, but he hadn't come to make war on them. He had to talk to them, somehow, and they were likely to be feeling paranoid. Or perhaps they were laughing, he added in the privacy of his own head; the Marines probably hadn't looked very impressive when they'd been running across the sand.

The gates opened as he approached, revealing a single man, aged before his time. Neil honestly couldn't place his age; he looked to be around thirty, yet he seemed to act as if he was far older. Grey hair and an unhealthy pallor in his face suggested that the settlers didn't have a proper diet, let alone proper medical care. Neil had been on worlds that had been deliberately settled with the intent of using as little modern technology as possible, but even they had proper medical care. The penal world, of course, hadn't been given anything

of the sort. No one gave a damn about what happened to the people on the surface. They'd been sent to the penal world to die.

"Welcome to Haven," the man said. There was a weary resigned tone in his voice, as if he expected that the Marines had come to lay waste to his world. "What do you want here?"

Neil smiled inwardly. The man was direct, something he appreciated. He cracked open his visor — after running a final check on the local environment — and opened his armoured suit, allowing them to see his face. The stench — a stench of rotting eggs and fish, reminiscent of part of the Marine training camp — hit him like a hammer, but somehow he refrained from gagging. He needed them to believe him. It would be so much easier if they believed him.

"We're not from the Empire," he said. Explaining about the mutiny and the rebel fleet — to say nothing of the popular front and the various underground groups out along the Rim — would take too long. "We're here to take you away from this world, if you would like to leave."

The man stared at him. "Are you mad?"

"No, sir," Neil said, trying to project confidence and certainty into his voice. "We rebelled against the Empire and we are looking for recruits. Do you want to stay on this planet or come with us?"

He wasn't sure what reaction he would receive. There had never been a breakout from a penal world before, yet there had been some dark stories in the Marine Corp's archive, suggestions that perhaps not all of the convicts would want to leave. Or, perhaps, that the strong men who ruled the penal worlds wouldn't want to give up their power — or, perhaps, that they simply would not be believed. The men and women who had been dumped onto the hellish world would not expect anyone to come for them. They had *known* that they would spend the rest of their lives on the planet's surface.

The man started to cry. "We want to leave," he said. "When do we go?"

Neil concealed a smile. "We can start loading you onto the shuttles now," he said. "We just have to find as many people as we can."

The chief led him into the centre of the village. Neil was shocked, despite himself; the sight was pitiful. Half-built huts, starving people, a handful of very thin children… the women, in particular, looked beaten down by their lives. Young men armed with primitive firearms — his sensors picked up traces of gunpowder, of all things — watched his suit warily, although some of them were clearly envious. There were a number of cripples wandering around, their faces blank and unheeding; women who could have been cured within days back in the Empire. There were no male cripples, yet it took him a moment

to realise why. The hash logic of survival meant that a male cripple couldn't make any contribution to the community, so they were turned out into the world to die.

Neil had seen terrible things before. He'd waded through blood after a rebellion on a mining colony had become too dangerous for the Blackshirts to handle; he'd seen the aftermath of a radiation bomb strike on an inhabited planet's capital city. He should have taken it in his stride, yet somehow the sight affected him more than he wanted to admit. These people had been simply abandoned to their fate. It was… disgusting. The penal worlds were just part of the system for keeping people in line.

"We're going to start bringing down additional shuttles now," he said, trying to avoid looking at one woman. Heavily pregnant, one of her legs was missing, forcing her to walk around on a wooden cage. The sight disturbed him on a very primal level. "And then we can get you all out of here."

"Thank you," the chief said. The sheer gratitude in his voice was almost embarrassing. His wife, a weak-looking girl with fading hair, gazed up at the Marines worshipfully. "Thank you."

Chapter Sixteen

Colin paced the command deck, feeling the seconds ticking away.

It was irrational, he knew, yet he couldn't stop feeling as if some great unseen doom was rushing towards him. Seeing the images from the planet below — he'd had them put on the open datanet, allowing the entire crew to see what they were fighting against — had reminded him of his certain fate if he were to lose the war. And, if he'd had any doubts, it was also proof that he was fighting on the right side. Colin wouldn't have lost any sleep over the deaths of serial killers or paedophiles, yet the Empire had placed such abominable people in with rebels and others who had merely wanted a better life for themselves. It was a chilling reminder of the true nature of the Empire. It was a system that just didn't care.

The records they'd recovered from the orbital station hadn't been that detailed, not entirely to Colin's surprise. Hester had given them a list of names she wanted recovered, yet Colin knew that it would be as much a matter of luck as judgement. The Marines had dispatched shuttles on recon missions to search for unregistered settlements — the Empire hadn't bothered to keep close track of the prisoners, hence the shortage of data on the planet's vicious wildlife — but there was no way to guarantee results. Colin was mildly surprised that the planet hadn't been turned into a hunting world for members of the Thousand Families — there were several worlds with unpleasant wildlife that served in that role — yet they *were* over six months from Earth. Or perhaps someone senior had conspired to hide the data in order to save them having to find another penal world.

He glanced up at the display as another of the small freighters broke orbit and headed down towards the planet's surface, summoned by one of the Marine teams. The smaller freighters had one advantage over the other transports; if worst came to worse, they could flicker out from within the planet's atmosphere, escaping any vengeful Imperial Navy fleet. Colin had reinforced their crews with Marines — some of the prisoners they rescued were likely to fall into the category of people who had thoroughly deserved their sentence –yet it was something else that worried him. He had already privately determined that if they did happen to recover a genuine criminal, that criminal would be escorted to an airlock and ejected out into space. It was harsh, but if they released a real criminal, the Empire would get a hell of a propaganda victory out of it. Besides, he had grown up on a world where criminals had often been free to do as they pleased. A quick decompression was almost merciful.

"Admiral, we may have a problem," Flag Captain Jeremy Damiani

said. Colin looked up sharply. Damiani would not have been human if he hadn't resented the elevation of a mere Commander over his head, even though he hadn't been part of the rebellion, yet he'd carried out his duties well. Even Anderson, a compulsive paranoid, had admitted that. "The long-range sensors picked up traces of a flicker emergence."

Colin brought up the display on his own private console and frowned. *Something* had definitely emerged into the system, out beyond the orbit of the outermost world. It wasn't charging at them and spitting out missiles, which suggested that Percival hadn't anticipated their movements and had a superdreadnaught squadron of his own in a position to intercept them, but it was worrying. Who were they and what did they want? It was possible, he knew, that they might be pirates or free-traders, yet Colin didn't believe in coincidence. Besides, the interrogation of Commander Fox hadn't revealed any links to free-traders, a depressing burst of honesty on the part of an otherwise deeply corrupt man.

"They're watching us," he decided. It made sense. None of the nearby stars had a force capable of meeting his superdreadnaughts and destroying them, so they'd sent a single ship in to watch his force and attempt to track them when they flickered out. He ran through the calculations in his head, but there was no way to tell which particular system had sent the observing starship. If it *was* an observing starship and not just a free-trader trying to hide, or a pirate crew plotting their latest raid. "I want you to detach two of the battlecruisers and send them on a recon patrol. We might as well try to scare them out of concealment."

"Yes, sir," Damiani said. He hesitated. It was the job of a Flag Captain to raise any concerns he might have, yet his previous commanding officer hadn't thought highly of anyone who dared to question her. "The enemy ship will have cloaked. They may not find anything."

"Possibly," Colin said. He shrugged. "It's still worth a try." He keyed his console, bringing up the link to the landing parties. "Inform the Marines to try to speed things up, if possible. We may be running out of time up here."

* * *

Simon looked around his hut, marvelling at how little there was that he truly cared for, or about. The small collection of clothes — made from local materials — could be left behind without causing his heart to turn over, while the handful of tools they'd made could be abandoned to the tender mercies of the bandits. The blankets Alice

and he had used when they'd snuggled together against the cold — the planet's variable star ensured that some winters were colder than others — were nothing more than a reminder of everything they'd lost, including two children. Alice had miscarried twice before they'd finally given up trying to have kids. It was just another example of how the Empire didn't care. They claimed to want a colony created by Simon and his descendents, yet the conditions they'd created seemed designed to prevent them from having any descendents.

Shaking his head, he walked out of the hut, leaving the door open. It had never really been locked anyway, not when locks had been beyond their capabilities to produce. The bandits could take Haven, if they wanted it; the entire settlement had chosen to leave and head off into orbit with the Marines. The rebels had promised that, if they didn't want to fight, they could go to a more survivable colony somewhere past the Rim. They hadn't given details, and not all of the involuntary settlers trusted them, but it was the best offer they had. Besides, the Empire wouldn't waste time with an imaginative pretence, not if they wanted to rid the planet of human life. They would just have dropped a tailored virus and exterminated the settlers.

The shuttles had lifted off for a moment and used their drives to scorch the sand, preventing the sand-crawlers from breaking through to the surface and coming to attack the humans as they walked out onto the sand. The Marines had spread out and were maintaining a perimeter, although Simon privately suspected that some of them wanted trophies to take back to their base. One of the crawlers — a spider-like creature that they rarely saw openly — had been yanked out of its nest and torn apart by one of the Marines. Simon envied them their powered armour. Without it, they would probably have been forced into stony ground too, not unlike the settlers.

"Hurry," one of the Marines ordered. At Simon's request, a small party had been sent to contact the Crabs and invite them to leave as well, although he'd detected little enthusiasm for the job. Humans had been told for so long that they were vastly superior to any alien race that even the decent ones believed it. "We may not have much time."

The women were already onboard the shuttles. Given their condition, the Marine CO had ordered that they be sent up first, in order for the doctors to take a look at them. Simon wondered if Alice would want to stay with him, if she discovered other options, yet it didn't matter. Restoring them all to health would take time and effort. Simon turned to look back towards Haven and smiled. The town probably wouldn't last a month without the humans attempting to maintain it, and then there would be no trace that they had ever lived on the surface of the godforsaken world. The bandits would be all that

was left of humanity on the penal world.

He looked back towards the shuttle as he stepped through the hatch, climbing into the ship's interior. It felt wonderful to be in an air conditioned compartment again, although it was a mocking reminder that he and his fellow settlers stank. Once they were in orbit, who knew what would happen to them? He hadn't had a proper shower in years. Swimming in the planet's lakes and oceans was nothing more than a quick way of committing suicide.

And then he heard the howling.

* * *

Neil watched, keeping his expression blank with an effort, as the aliens marched into one of the shuttles. Actually, calling it a march was being generous, he decided; it looked more like a scuttle. The Crabs hadn't believed the Marines at first — why should they, when the only Marines they had encountered beforehand had been the ones who had boarded their ships — yet the sight of the shuttles had convinced them. Only a few had chosen to leave the planet though, much to Neil's surprise; the remainder had chosen to remain in their underwater colony and stay away from the human race.

His head snapped up inside his helmet as his audio receptors picked up the howling. It was coming from human mouths, yet there was nothing human in it, as if an alien was speaking through their vocal cords. His sensors picked them up a moment later, tall figures sneaking through the jungle, heading right towards the shuttles. Before he could do more than raise his weapon, the jungle parted, revealing the bandits in all of their glory. Neil shuddered. Whatever they had once been, they had forsaken it long ago; they had even forsaken their humanity. They were monsters.

The bandits were naked, carrying nothing, but spears and a handful of projectile weapons that they carried as if they intended to use them as clubs. Their eyes were bright with madness, a madness that sought to devour everything on the planet. The Empire had dumped thousands of criminally-insane men on the surface, yet being on the planet — surviving when so many others had died — had only made their condition worse. He understood, now, why the women of the settlement had been so scared of the bandits. These weren't just evil men; these were men for whom the concept of right and wrong had faded away long ago, if they even had the intellect to understand how far they had fallen. The human beast, stripped down to its essentials, was not a pretty sight. The bandits only wanted to survive. They had literally nothing else to live for.

"My God," one of the Marines breathed. "Sir…?"

"Hold your positions," Neil ordered, over the secure channel. The howling of the bandits was growing worse, as if they were posturing over an issue beyond the comprehension of a sane human being. They lifted their primitive weapons and waved them at the Marines, stamping their feet and howling their feelings; they weren't, as far as he could tell, actually speaking in any language. They might have lost their grasp of the human tongue long ago. "Let the Crabs get into their shuttles and then we can fall back…"

One of the Crabs, just for a second, came into view and all of the bandits stared at it. A moment later, their howls grew louder, as if the mere sight of the alien had brought on a mental shift. They seemed, almost, to be shouting out a word, although Neil's suit couldn't translate it. That was odd — as far as he knew, few had been on the planet long enough for it to develop a dialect of its own — yet it was the least of his worries. The lead bandit had lifted a primitive stone axe, held it to the sky as if he expected the local star to bless it, and then hurled it right at Neil's armour. It glanced off, of course, yet it was the signal for the bandits. They all started hurling their axes at the Marines and, past them, at the Crabs.

"Shoot the axes down," Neil ordered. His weapon interlinked with the suit's systems, spitting out bursts of plasma towards the axes, destroying them in flight. He half-expected the bandits to realise what they were up against and start running, but instead they charged — right at the Marines. Neil didn't have a moment to act before one of them landed on top of his suit, clawing at the armour. He saw the man's eyes through the visor and shuddered. There was no sign of any rationality there. "Take them out."

He plucked his attacker off his armour and threw him towards the edge of the sand, where the crawlers were lying in wait. The bandit didn't have a moment to scream before a crawler appeared and gnashed his head off, dragging the remainder of his body under the sand. The other bandits were rapidly disposed of by the Marines, yet none of them had the sense to run, to flee the gods in invincible armour. It dawned on Neil that, just perhaps, the bandits had wanted to die, that they hadn't wanted to remain alive on the penal world. Or maybe not; if they'd wanted to die, their world offered many ways to do it, some almost painless. There were already signs of life stirring in the jungle, drawn by the smell of blood and dead bodies.

"Get into the shuttles," he ordered. He took a moment to check in with the other Marine parties. Between them, they'd liberated nearly a hundred thousand prisoners. It looked impressive, but he knew that the Empire had funnelled over two million prisoners onto the penal world. What had happened to the others? There was no way to know

for sure, but it was easy to guess. Their penal world had killed them. "It's time to get the hell off this planet."

"And thank god for that," one of the Marine said.

Neil didn't bother to argue. He shared the same sentiments.

* * *

"The shuttles are returning to their ships now, Admiral," the communications officer reported. "The freighters are already preparing to flicker out to the rendezvous point."

"Clear them to depart when they're ready," Colin ordered, not taking his eyes off the display. *Shadow* and *Thunder Child*, two ships from the former Observation Squadron, were still hunting for the unknown ship, yet they'd found nothing. Colin wasn't too surprised — it had been a search for a needle in a haystack — but it had been worth a try. Besides, it allowed him a chance to see how the starship crews coped with the mission, after he'd resorted the crews to make it harder for any surviving Imperial Intelligence agents to put together a counter-mutiny. "The remainder of us will be along soon enough."

He'd given his word that Commander Fox and his men wouldn't be harmed and he intended to keep it, if not completely. They'd interrogated the women who had been kept on the orbiting station and they'd testified that many — indeed, most — of the crew had been abusive, more than willing to hurt the women if they refused to cooperate. Colin didn't intend to allow that to pass unpunished; besides, Commander Fox had no information Colin needed. Once the interrogations had been completed, Colin had transferred them into a pod and left them there. Unlike the Empire, Colin had included a supply of medical equipment and even some weapons, although they wouldn't last forever. Once the power cells ran out, they would be gone.

"Launch the pod," he ordered. A moment later, Commander Fox's pod fell out of orbit and started falling down towards the planet's surface, near one of the few settlements that had refused to leave the planet. There had been times when the pods had burned up in the atmosphere, rather than landing on the surface, but Colin's engineers had checked the pod. It should deliver its contents to the surface relatively safely. "Helm; power up the drive and prepare to jump us out of here."

He took one last look at the network of orbital defences covering the planet, and then he tapped a code into his console. Their self-destruct systems activated, destroying the defences and leaving the wreckage falling down towards the surface of the planet. If nothing

else, the Empire would have to replace all of the facilities before they repossessed the planet and started shipping out new convicts. It was just another nail in Admiral Percival's coffin.

"Take us out of here," he ordered. "It's time to go home."

* * *

Commander Fox had run out of curses long ago as the pod headed down towards the surface of the planet. It was no smooth shuttle ride, but a bumpy fall towards the surface of the planet, disaster averted only by the parachute deploying and dumping them somewhere on the main continent. The shock of the impact left them all stunned for a few moments, before he finally managed to free himself from the webbing and stagger towards the hatch. It took another few minutes of wrestling before the hatch opened and he half-fell onto the surface of the planet. The stench hit him at once and he wrinkled his nose, feeling vomit bubbling up from inside him. He swallowed hard and looked around. They were lying right on the edge of a massive patch of sand, near a jungle. In the distance, he could see smoke…

And there was something moving, just below the surface of the sand.

"Come on," he shouted.

And then he started to run.

Chapter Seventeen

The innermost chambers of Admiral Percival's private quarters — luxurious even by the standards of the Thousand Families — were dominated by images of a blonde woman, a woman Penny had never been able to identify. She was tall, with a patrician appearance and very long hair, as if she were born to the purple, yet she only appeared in submissive poses. The main artwork, one that appeared in the main chamber, was of the woman kneeing naked, with her legs spread wide and her hands locked behind her head. Penny had thought, at first, that Percival had been trying to tell her something; later, she'd realised that Percival wasn't that subtle, or keen to hide what he was. The woman's identity and her meaning to the Admiral remained a mystery. In truth, Penny wasn't sure that she wanted to know.

She settled back on the sofa and crossed her legs, attempting to portray an image of being at her ease while Commander David Howe outlined the Jackson's Folly campaign. Howe was Brent-Cochrane's man through and through, a client from a family of clients, someone who could be expected to paint his master in the best possible light. Even so, it was hard to disguise the fact that events weren't going quite as well as they should. After a successful operation against Jackson's Folly's space-based defence force — such as it was — the Blackshirts were getting bogged down by insurgency warfare and a bloody-minded population that seemed to regard civil disobedience as a way of life. If the planet and its population weren't wanted intact, the planet would probably have been scorched by now, yet instead several Blackshirt commanders had been relieved for excessive force. That had struck Penny as hilarious when she'd first heard about it, just before she'd boarded the battlecruiser for the trip back to Camelot. Excessive force was normally the key to advancement in the Blackshirts, the more of it the better. They just weren't anything more than the Empire's sledgehammer.

But best of all, as far as she was concerned, was that there was no way that she could be blamed for the operation's successes and failures. She hadn't been in command; indeed, even Percival wouldn't have had the nerve to put her in a command position, not over someone as well-connected as Brent-Cochrane. His Family would go ballistic and Percival's career would feel the effects; there was no way that the Roosevelt Family would back him that far, not after such a foolish action. Brent-Cochrane would have the glory if the war was a success — she carefully didn't look at Stacy Roosevelt, who was occupying another chair, her face pale and expressionless — and,

unluckily for him, the blame if things continued to go badly wrong.

"And so he wants reinforcements," Percival demanded, finally. "Did he bother to suggest from where I should draw those reinforcements?"

Penny concealed her smile. She'd briefed Percival that there were relatively few Blackshirt divisions left in the sector, certainly not ones that could be pulled away from their current duties and reassigned. The Empire's rule was, not entirely surprisingly, rarely popular and if the Blackshirts were called away, a safe rear area might no longer be safe. Percival might have the authority to scorch second-rank or third-rank worlds, yet his superiors would not be too happy with any such action. Planets were expensive and terraforming a world after it had been scorched was a tedious, time-consuming project.

"No, Admiral," Howe said. For the first time, he looked uncertain. Penny almost sympathised. How could he know how far his patron would back him? "He merely wishes you to know that accomplishing the objective of breaking Jackson's Folly to the will of the Empire will require either reinforcements or mass slaughter."

Percival scowled, his face turning an alarming shade of purple. "I will consider your master's orders," he said, in a tone that suggested that Brent-Cochrane had better watch his back. Penny shrugged to herself. Percival had never faced such a series of interlocking catastrophes before and it was bringing out the worst in him. How long would it be, she wondered, before he started searching for a scapegoat? If she knew him at all — and, after five years of service, she knew him very well — it wouldn't be long at all. "I suggest that you transfer your chips to the intelligence staff here and then get some rest. I may wish to talk to you later."

Howe, at least, was bright enough to recognise a dismissal when he heard one. Bowing his head to Stacy, he saluted Percival, turned and marched out of the quarters. He'd probably find his way to the relaxation centre and have some fun with the girls there, before getting some sleep — or perhaps he was canny enough to go straight to his assigned quarters and get some rest. There was no way to know, but then, Penny didn't really care.

"Penny," Percival said, turning back to face her. She nodded, concealing her own apprehension. "Do you agree with the report from Commodore Brent-Cochrane?"

Penny kept her face expressionless. It could be a set-up, an attempt to shift the blame, or it could be a genuine question. With Percival, either was possible. "Jackson's Folly is unusually well-armed for a world," she said, carefully. "Occupying the surface is one thing; crushing the planet's determination to fight on is going to take much longer. On the other hand, the planet's high orbitals are in our hands

and the locals have no way of displaying us from those positions. Our ultimate victory is assured."

"Yet we need the planet's population relatively intact," Stacy pointed out. Just for a second, she sounded the age she appeared, a teenage girl far out of her depth. Penny felt no sympathy. Even if Stacy had been in command, even if the mutiny hadn't taken place, the results would have been identical. "We need to exploit the world and its daughter colonies, not destroy it."

Penny shrugged, smiling inwardly. The Roosevelt Family had spent a vast amount of political capital on securing control of Sector 117 — although incomplete control — and Jackson's Folly, seeing the world and its daughter colonies as valuable assets. They wouldn't be too happy with seeing the worlds reduced to dust and ash, or for the trained and experienced workforce living in place to be slaughtered mercilessly. Stacy Roosevelt had fallen from prospective heir to Family Head to an embarrassment, a family disgrace better packed off to some mining colony along the Rim, where pirates might kill her and spare the family additional embarrassment. Or maybe she would be allowed to retire gracefully on Earth, or one of the pleasure worlds. It wouldn't do for the commoners to see an aristocrat being so firmly broken. It might give the lower orders ideas.

"And we will accomplish that goal," Percival assured her. "It may just take a little longer than we planned."

He turned to Penny, his eyes drifting over her tight uniform jacket before looking up at her face. "That still leaves us with the problem of the treacherous Commander Walker and his merry men," he said, darkly. It was so unusually focused for him that Penny blinked in surprise, unable to conceal her reaction. "How do we stop him from upsetting our noble patrons any further?"

"Simple," Derbyshire said, with all the ease of a man who knew that he wouldn't have to carry out the plan — or bear the responsibility for failure. "We find and destroy his fleet."

Penny snorted, before she could stop herself. "Sir, with all due respect, that task isn't easy," she said. "The entire Imperial Navy is a grain of sand compared to the sheer immensity of this sector alone, never mind the entire Empire. Locating his fleet would require luck more than judgement, something we could hardly count upon receiving. At the moment, he gets to pick and choose the time and place of his attacks. That isn't something we can do for ourselves. There is literally nowhere for us to strike."

"And so we move against their families," Derbyshire said, changing tact. Penny winced. She had hoped that they wouldn't consider such a tactic. "We know who the rebels are…"

"We know who *some* of the rebels are," Penny countered. "Do you

want to round up the families of the innocent along with the guilty?"

"They're all rebels, therefore they are not innocent," Derbyshire pointed out, coldly. "We round up their families and make it known that, unless they surrender, their families will bear the brunt of the price for treason."

The Empire, Penny knew, took a dim view of treason — or indeed any dissent at all. The ringleaders were often publicly executed, just to ram the point home, while their subordinates would be transported to penal worlds, accompanied by their families. In theory, the tactic would work — it would certainly upset the rebels, including those who had been pressed into rebellion by their peers — but in practice she wasn't so sure. Besides, most of the rebel ringleaders had no families, or had been estranged from them.

"They just raided a penal world," Percival pointed out, coming to her rescue. "Where would you suggest sending their families?"

Derbyshire flushed hotly. "There are *other* penal worlds," he said. "We can even use their families as bait in a trap."

"I misspoke," Percival said, coldly. "How many other penal worlds are there in this sector?"

Penny smiled, although she fought to turn it into a frown. There was only one penal world in Sector 117, the very same world that had been raided by the rebels. If Percival sent a vast number of prisoners into another sector, he would have to explain why he wasn't sending them to his own penal world, which would mean explaining that he had a rebellion on his hands. Percival's only hope of career survival — and perhaps even saving his life — lay in capturing or killing the rebels before the Roosevelt Family dumped him and the Imperial Navy relieved him of command and ordered him home to face a Board of Inquiry. Percival was neither senior enough nor well-connected enough to avoid facing the consequences of his failure.

The idea of using the rebel families — the Empire believed in guilt by association — as bait in a trap wasn't a bad one, but Penny could see several problems with it. The real problem, of course, was that it was *obvious*. The rebels would have to be fools to ignore the possibility — and, so far, the rebels had played it smart. Percival might have wracked his brains trying to understand why the rebels would have hit a penal world — instead of flying straight to Camelot with blood in their eye — yet Penny understood. The penal worlds were the ultimate threat, a warning that anyone with dissident or criminal tendencies could be plucked from their lives and deposited on a hellish world where they would have to fight every day to survive. Walker and his rebels, by rescuing people from a penal world, had challenged the entire system. And, in doing so, they'd risked very little.

"I will work with my contacts to determine who along the Rim is supporting them," Derbyshire said, changing the subject rapidly. "They must have a base of operations somewhere and we will find it. And then we *will* have something to hit."

Penny wasn't so sure, but she understood the logic. Commander Walker — using his superior's authority — had requisitioned enough supplies from Camelot to keep the Observation Squadron going for several years, but it wouldn't be enough to feed the appetites of nine superdreadnaughts. He'd need a base and a source of supply, although she could guess how he intended to continue supplying his ships. There were thousands of corrupt procurement officers in the Imperial Navy and someone with the right contacts could get his hands on almost anything. It wouldn't be too difficult, with enough money…

Which raised another question, she knew. How exactly did the rebels intend to fund their rebellion? Coming to think of it, what was their actual goal? To overthrow the Empire, or was it merely to get revenge on Percival? And, if the former Imperial Navy officers had made contact with other rebel factions, as the attack on the penal world suggested, what did *they* want?

She pushed the issue to one side and smiled. "There are good reasons to believe that they have allies from outside the Imperial Navy," she said. "The simplest course of action is to detach several squadrons of light cruisers and destroyers, using them to run recon missions though the Beyond and search for any hidden colonies. They can attempt to locate any rebel bases, with the added advantage that if we are noisy enough, someone may give them up rather than run the risk of us locating other hidden colonies."

Percival nodded. "Good thinking," he said. "And once we find them, we send in the superdreadnaughts and force them to stand and fight."

"If they will stand and fight," Derbyshire sneered. "What's to stop them from flickering out and vanishing somewhere further past the Rim?"

"Nothing," Penny agreed, "Except, of course, the fact that we'd have forced them to abandon their base and made them look weak in the eyes of the Beyond. They know that the Empire is strong, yet the rebels will give them hope. If we can destroy that hope…"

She allowed the thought to sink in, and then continued. "On the downside, that is a very long-term project, one with no guarantee of success," she said. It was true enough. Searching a single star system for a hidden colony was a long and tedious task; searching along the Rim, or out into the Beyond, would take centuries. Somehow, she doubted the rebels would stand still and allow Percival to hunt for them. "We need to lure them into a trap."

Penny crossed her legs again and keyed the terminal, bringing up a chart of Sector 117. “There are thousands of possible targets,” she said, “depending on just what the rebels have in mind. They could go after our shipping” — the Annual Fleet still hadn’t appeared, leading her to wonder if the rebels had jumped and destroyed the fleet — “or they could target the various Family-owned worlds in the sector, weakening our position and embarrassing us at home. Only a handful of worlds can hope to stand their fleet off for longer than a few hours; if we assume that they won’t go after such worlds…”

“Really,” Derbyshire interrupted. “And what grounds do you have for assuming such a thing?”

Penny refused to allow him to fluster her. “The rebels do not have access to any shipyards capable of repairing a superdreadnaught,” she said. “Repairing a superdreadnaught, even in a shipyard, is not a trivial task. They would probably prefer to keep their superdreadnaughts undamaged for as long as possible.”

“Unless they’ve somehow established a shipyard in the Beyond,” Percival added. He sounded as if his previous delight had turned sour. “They could be turning out their own superdreadnaughts.”

“If that were the case,” Derbyshire said, “we’d have seen newer superdreadnaughts pointed at us by now, built by the underground movements based along the Rim.”

Penny nodded. “And there is another factor to consider,” she added. She looked up at her patron, feeling her insides churning. Percival wasn’t going to like this at all, not even slightly. “Commander Walker has a grudge against you personally.”

“Ungrateful piece of shit,” Percival said. His voice had turned savage, as if he were so angry he had to fight to get the words out. “I take him from the gutter, build him up into a fine young officer and *this* is how he repays me?”

Penny doubted that it had been that way at all. Reading between the lines, she suspected that Percival had used Commander Walker as a tool and then discarded him when his usefulness was over. The secure files had been quite indicative, with carefully-written statements in Walker’s file that suggested he was too ambitious to be trusted with high command. Her lips twitched, humourlessly. Percival had been quite right about that, although not for the right reasons. He’d just seen it as squashing a bug with unsubtle ambitions.

“Regardless, he has a grudge,” Penny said, calmly. “And that grudge is going to lead him to strike against you — and to pick targets that hurt you.”

“Camelot itself, then,” Percival said. His voice broke off, suddenly. “I see what you mean.”

Penny smiled. “You’re a Roosevelt client, so hurting the Roosevelt

Family hurts you, because it makes you look incompetent," she said, firmly. "There are nine worlds within the sector that would make good targets, with the dual aim of embarrassing you and weakening the Roosevelt hold on this sector. Those worlds will be targeted by the rebels, certainly soon if not now."

She keyed the terminal. "We call the superdreadnaughts back from Jackson's Folly, but we leave decoy drones in their place," she said. "Commodore Brent-Cochrane moves his squadron to the most likely target and lurks there, under cloak. When the rebels show up, he moves to intercept and destroy them."

"Defeating the rebellion in one blow," Percival agreed. His grin grew wider, like a shark's. "I must compliment you. Sending you on invasion missions as an observer clearly helps you to think."

Penny smiled, modestly. It wouldn't remain *her* idea for very long.

"I will cut the orders for Brent-Cochrane at once," Percival added. Penny didn't miss the long look Stacy gave him, warning him that he had better ensure that the Roosevelt Family's interests were protected. "And then" — he reached out and ran a finger down her arm — "perhaps we can celebrate in private."

Penny nodded, keeping her true feelings concealed with the ease of long practice. There was no point in pointing out that the rebels hadn't been beaten yet. It would only have upset him.

Chapter Eighteen

"So," Hester said. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

Colin shrugged. It had never occurred to him that he might suffer from a fear of crowds. In the Imperial Navy Academy, he'd been packed in with other cadets of his own age, while senior cadets had ruled with a rod of iron, keeping trouble-makers in line with beatings and demerits. The cramped, almost claustrophobic conditions hadn't bothered him; indeed, he'd been having trouble sleeping in the massive Admiral's quarters that had been set aside for Stacy Roosevelt. He certainly had never experienced any discomfort on starships, even as a young Midshipman.

And yet… standing in the centre of the massive room, exchanging small talk with everyone — they sought him out personally — made him want to run off and hide, perhaps back onboard the superdreadnaught. He'd been in formal balls before as one of Percival's aides, yet there he'd been very much a wallflower, too lowly to be noticed. Here, he was the centre of attention. Everyone from underground leaders to starship commanders and cult leaders had come to see him, him personally. It was almost too much to bear. He would have preferred to face a fleet of superdreadnaughts wearing only a towel.

"I have been worse," he said, gravely. Hester had effectively taken over his social schedule, introducing him to the real movers and shakers along the Rim. Some of them had been keen to work with the rebels, hoping that one day they would be able to return to the worlds the Empire had taken; others had been less willing to cooperate, either through fear of the Empire or simple disinterest. "Is all of this really necessary?"

It came out more plaintive than he had hoped and Hester smiled in understanding. "I'll let you in on a little secret," she said, moving her lips so that they were right next to his ear. Her breath was chilly, freezing cold. "The first time I had to address a congress of revolutionary factions, I was so nervous that I kept going to the toilet and they eventually had to send someone to see how I was. There are more kinds of bravery than merely charging into battle and dying heroically."

Colin snorted. The Thousand Families seemed to be born with the kind of arrogance that made such parties bearable. He couldn't imagine Stacy Roosevelt, or even Percival himself, having a problem with the gathering. They would have been happily chatting about nothing, or sharing spiteful tales about their rivals, or even cutting deniable deals with all and sundry. They would have been delighted

to be the centre of attention, and very insulted if they'd been ignored. Colin… wanted to run and hide.

In hopes of a distraction, he looked around the massive chamber. Someone had carved it into the heart of an icy asteroid, using fusion torches to carve out a romantic retreat, yet it felt surprisingly warm. Hundreds of representatives moved through the chamber, chatting with others, although all of them had made time to speak to Colin. He'd thought that he would have to make contact, but as Hester had promised, they all came to him. And, of course, they all wanted something.

He caught sight of an inhumanly tall form and shivered. The Nerds, unlike the Geeks, believed in unrestrained genetic engineering and exploration of human potential. By now, centuries after the first of them had been forced to flee the Empire, there was a small subculture of genetically-modified humans running through the Beyond, all too aware that the Empire would shoot them and dissect them if they were captured. Some could pass for baseline human; others, hybrids between human and animal DNA, were very far from human. The Nerds had been willing to pledge their support, just like their counterparts, but they'd had a price. The Empire's restrictions on genetic engineering, intended to prevent commoners from improving themselves, had to be scrapped.

They weren't the only ones with a price. The Free Traders, an organisation with links to Daria's Freebooter League, wanted an end to price-fixing and the other games the massive Family-owned shipping cartels used to force the independents out of business. The exiles wanted to return to their homes and liberate them from the Empire. Various criminal organisations wanted an end to rules they considered oppressive. Religious factions wanted freedom of religion, or even a chance to preach their particular gospel to the remainder of the Empire. To all of them, Colin had been non-committal, although some of them struck more of a chord with him than others. The only group he had refused outright had been a representative from the pirates, who had been willing to offer assistance in return for permission to loot and rape freely. Colin had refused and asked Hester to make sure that no others like them were invited to the meeting.

"So you say," he said. He asked the question again. "Is this really necessary?"

"They need to see you," Hester said, unflappably. "They need to know that you are real and that you have lines that you won't cross, or you will discover that they're either refusing to believe in you or moulding you into a symbol for their group alone. Just keep smiling and it will all be over soon."

Colin shook his head as another small group, this one composed

of three young-looking women with old eyes, approached them. They exchanged small talk for five minutes before the women shook his hand and departed, leaving him mystified as to their names or the identities of the groups they represented. That wasn't too unusual along the Rim — paranoia was a survival instinct when the Empire was out there, intent on bringing the hidden colonies into line — but that group had been odder than most. Colin caught himself staring after them and turned back to Hester, who was smiling.

"They call themselves the Daughters of Artemis, a clan of warrior women," Hester explained, once the women were out of earshot. "They're regarded as a cult by the Empire, but they make good friends and dangerous enemies. That said, they're not going to trust you much; to them, you're just another man. They may help you out, if you ask, but they will never be your friends."

Colin frowned. The Rim still found ways to surprise him. "And can they help us?"

"Oh, yes," Hester said. "They're known for being savage fighters and they have a very strong intelligence network throughout the Empire. There are even supposed to be versions of the cult within the Thousand Families" — Colin looked up, sharply — "as the lines are blurred along the Rim. Who knows?"

She glanced down at her wristcom, forestalling any questions. "And it is nearly time for you to speak," she said, with a grin. Her allies were already helping the guests find their way into the large auditorium. "I hope that you haven't forgotten the words."

Colin scowled at her, but said nothing, his eyes seeking out Daria for reassurance. He'd given presentations on tactics at the Academy, yet that was nothing like addressing over a thousand men and women, some of whom were almost certainly linked to the Empire. Hester had pointed out that some of the underground leaders — the ones with massive prices on their heads — had been reluctant to attend, fearing the Empire and its intelligence services.

"I see," Colin had said. "So why are you here?"

Hester had smirked. "I'm too old to care, dear boy," she'd explained. "If they want to capture an old crone like myself… I don't care."

Colin had expected that he would be first into the room, but Hester had explained that they had to make a presentation of it, something that showed how calm, relaxed and sure of final victory they were. Colin had pointed out that they were none of those things, yet Hester had explained that perception was everything in a war of nerves. If Colin and his associates looked comfortable and certain of victory, others would wonder if they were right — and, because they wanted to believe that there was hope for final victory, they would

believe in him. Colin hoped that they were right.

It struck him that it was an odd way to win a war. He'd believed that they would be clashing against Imperial loyalists, first Admiral Percival's sector fleet and then the might of the Imperial Navy when it finally realised that it had a significant problem on its hands. Instead, of all things, they were giving a dinner party! Colin knew that, along the Rim, luxury foodstuffs and fine wines were extremely expensive — algae-based food was edible, but no one could make it tasty — and they were practically giving it away. He suspected that half of the guests had come merely for the food.

Anderson had warned, quite rightly, that many of the guests would have their own links to Imperial Intelligence. Part of the reason they'd chosen the icy asteroid as a base for the meeting was because it was useless, a place that could be abandoned as soon as the meeting was finished. Colin knew that he'd put his head in the noose, but as long as he was careful, there was only a small chance of being assassinated. Anderson had insisted on disarming the guests, yet they had refused and Hester had backed them up. So many resistance and underground leaders in one place was a tempting target for the Empire — or, for that matter, their rivals.

His wristcom buzzed, summoning him through a small door into a massive chamber. He'd seen it earlier, but he hadn't realised just how large it would be when populated, or how loud a roar would be raised when they saw him. Hester, he suspected, had ordered her allies to cheer loudly the second Colin appeared, creating an impression of a warm welcome. And part of it, he knew, was genuine. He had, after all, liberated friends and allies from the penal world. There were reunited families who had good cause to be grateful to him.

He refused to allow himself to flinch as he stepped onto the podium, Hester standing back to allow him to stand right in the centre of the room. It had been designed to pick up and amplify every word he spoke, leaving him to wonder if it could pick up the beating of his heart. It was thumping so loudly in his chest that he wondered that he could hear anything over the sound.

Slowly, as Hester had taught him, he raised his hands and the cheering slowly started to die away. He caught sight of Cordova, sitting among a group of fellow captains, waving his massive hat at him. Cordova's approval counted for a lot, Colin realised, for his fellow captains were clapping and cheering too. He'd expected only a handful of cheers; instead, it felt as if the sound might shake the entire asteroid.

"My friends," he said. Unlike the message he'd sent to Percival, he'd spent days with Daria and Hester, struggling to outline the speech. They'd wanted to get it just right, warning him that not every

group would be impressed, or willing to play with others. The politics of the underground along the Rim were more complex than those at the heart of the Empire. “The Empire has been a problem for too long.”

There were more cheers, shaking the entire room. “We have all seen what it has done, in the past,” he said. “We have seen the scorched remains of dozens of worlds. We have seen the population of entire planets staved, crushed under by grinding taxes and corporate masters; we have seen lives destroyed and livelihoods wrecked. The Empire has become nothing more than a parasite, draining the lifeblood of humanity itself!”

This time, the cheers were slightly muted. He wasn’t telling them anything they didn’t already know. “I tell you now,” Colin continued, “that it is only going to get *worse*! Now, even as we speak, the Empire overruns the last remaining independent system — the last remaining independent system that it knows about! What will it do when it locates the colonies along the Rim? It will carve them up, share them out among the Thousand Families… and destroy yet another way of life. Is that what you want for your future?”

“NO,” the crowd shouted. They couldn’t all be ringers, Colin knew.

“And what happens when the loot runs out and the Thousand Families turn on each other?” Colin demanded. “There will be war, civil war, with thousands of planets burning in the blackness of space and the Imperial Navy shattered, used as a weapon as the Families war against each other! We cannot let that happen. I say to you now that we will *not* let that happen!

“The Empire must be reformed! The Empire will not reform, not of its own will; why should the Families give up their power? They will refuse to make the reforms they need, even though the system they have created locks them into a course towards disaster. We must reform the Empire and, to do that, we must force the Empire to be reformed!”

There were more cheers, with a new chant echoing through the room. “REFORM, REFORM, REFORM…”

Colin waited, trying to gage the crowd. He’d never believed that it was possible, but standing at the centre of the crowd, he could feel the wave of feelings washing over them. Some were interested in reform, yet others wanted revenge — true revenge, the kind of revenge that could not be allowed. The Thousand Families had younger members who could be convinced to join a reform movement, but they wouldn’t if it meant the deaths of their families and everyone they ever loved. Colin knew that he would have to temper the desire for revenge, somehow…

“I pledge my life to this cause,” he said, feeling the cheers lifting him upwards, boosting his stature beyond imagination. The feeling was both glorious and terrifying. “I swear that we will work to reform the Empire or die trying!”

He lowered his voice as the cheering died away. “We all have different ideas about how the Empire should be reformed,” he said, softly. “We cannot allow ourselves to get bogged down in petty details. Once we have broken the power of the system, once we have broken the force that holds thousands of star systems in bondage, we can discuss the future of the Empire. Until then, any plans for reform are nothing more than wishful thinking. And the only actions that will change the Empire, the only actions that will allow us a chance to reform the system, are meaningful actions. We must confront the Empire and force it to reform.

“And we can only do that as a popular front.

”We must put aside our differences and unite,” he said. “I pledge, for myself, that I will respect the result of any constitutional convention that draws up a new order for the Empire, one formed after the war. Those who fight with us will be invited to join the convention, to add their thoughts and feelings to the future of the Empire itself.

“I’ve seen the Empire. I’ve seen the discontent within the Imperial Navy, the hopes and fears of a thousand suffering worlds; the storm of rage that is confined, helplessly, by the sheer power of the Empire. I know that it is rotting away, yet there is still life in its strong branches. If we unite, we can defeat it; if we remain disunited, it will crush us. And if we lose, the hope of humanity is lost with us.”

His voice became more purposeful as he nodded to the small side table. Hester had placed it there, with a large notepad and a pen on top. “This document pledges us to stand together and fight against the Empire,” he concluded. He wrote his signature with a flourish. He’d been practicing. “I invite you all to stand with me.”

Colin turned and walked down the ramp and out of the compartment. Behind him, Hester Hyman was the first to follow him, signing her own name. And the rest of the convention followed.

* * *

The spy watched in disbelief as most of the underground and resistance movement leaders — or their chosen representatives — walked forward to add their own name to the list. The Rim seethed with discontent and groups that were sworn to fight the Empire, yet no one had ever possessed the power and determination to unite

them — until now. The spy mentally totted up the possible assets that had been pledged to the Popular Front and shuddered. It wasn't significant compared to the might of the Imperial Navy, but gathered in one place — with the Imperial Navy scattered out over the Empire — it was going to be formidable. The Empire had to be warned.

It would be impossible, the spy knew, to slip away, so she followed the line down to the table and added her own name. Imperial Intelligence wouldn't care, not as long as she brought home the bacon — and they'd want nothing less than the secret base Admiral Walker was using for his fleet. The spy knew more about the Rim than most — including the location of a number of hidden colonies whose inhabitants would have been surprised and upset to know she knew — yet she didn't know everything. And besides, there was no reason why Admiral Walker had to use an established colony. A new one, perhaps built by the Geeks, would serve his purpose.

The spy swallowed a curse as the meeting broke up into smaller groups, all chatting away enthusiastically. She had to get back to the Empire, but how? This news was too vital to wait for one of Imperial Intelligence's disguised ships. The Empire needed to know at once.

She shrugged as she moved away, in the company of a pair of rebels who had no idea about his true masters. She'd find a way and then… the Empire would reward her richly. It always did.

Chapter Nineteen

"And thank God that that's over," Colin said, taking off his jacket and throwing it over the nearest chair. The Popular Front meetings had taken, literally, days; he'd been hustled from group to group, each of which had wanted secret promises and assurances that Colin was in no position to offer. After a day of what felt like wasted time, he would have welcomed an Imperial Navy squadron roaring in, if only to break up the monotony. "If I'd known that forming an alliance of rebels was so much trouble…"

Daria laughed, taking one of the larger armchairs and crossing her legs mischievously. "I think you did very well," she said, with a wink. She'd changed from the understated shipsuit she'd worn into an outfit that rivalled Cordova's for colour and style. Daring flashes of light drew the eye towards the tops of her breasts, while the remainder of the outfit showed off the suppleness of her body. It almost seemed to draw attention away from her face. "You kept them talking and promised them nothing."

"Yeah," Khursheda said. Unlike the others, she wore an ordinary uniform; she'd been in command of the fleet while Colin had been at the asteroid, addressing the rebel forces. "Tell me something. How does an ordinary starship captain become such an accomplished politician?"

Daria favoured her with a dazzling smile. "It's really quite simple," she said. "I started with the Freebooter League — you should see the politics there — and went uphill from there. It never really changes; the people who have want to keep, while the people who don't have want to get. The key is to keep the various political positions balanced until it no longer matters."

Colin frowned, thoughtfully. "And when will it no longer matter?"

"When we rule the Empire, of course," Daria said, switching her smile onto him. "The newly-elected government will be the one to decide on just what course the Empire will chart in the future. The various factions skulking out here past the Rim will have a chance to make their voices heard, but we didn't promise them anything else — and we didn't have to make any promises. They are far better off with us than they are with the Empire."

Khursheda scowled at her. For some reason Colin had never been able to understand, the former Imperial Navy officer and the Freebooter didn't really seem to like one another. Khursheda had been the most vocal about not trusting Daria when they'd first made contact with her network of spies and intelligence operatives on

Jackson's Folly, where the Freebooters had been quietly slipping technology into the hands of the local government. It hadn't, according to the latest reports, been enough to stop the Empire. Jackson's Folly was now an occupied world and would remain so until Colin won his war… assuming it was won. The alternative didn't bear thinking about.

He'd considered taking his fleet back to Jackson's Folly — the Empire wouldn't keep the superdreadnaught squadron they'd used to break the planet's defences there indefinitely — and destroying the pickets left in the system, but it would be a pointless exercise. It would only make Jackson's Folly more of a target for the Empire, while Admiral Percival would simply launch a second invasion and recover the independent world. Raiding the pickets was one thing; actively liberating the planet, if only for a few weeks, was quite another.

"I wouldn't worry about it, Captain," Cordova said, clapping her on the shoulder. Khursheda glowered at him, although she seemed to hold the renegade Captain in higher esteem than Daria. "The politics can now be left to those who remain behind to hold the fort, while we warriors have to head off to war. And, when the war is won, we can see who is still standing."

Colin kept his face expressionless, although the truth was that he didn't know if he truly trusted the former Imperial Navy Captain. He wasn't in any position to complain about a mutinous officer, yet… there was something about Cordova that set him on edge. Perhaps it was the booming pronouncements he was fond of making, or perhaps it was the fact that Cordova seemed almost too good to be true. Colin had never asked him what future Cordova saw for the Empire — and, for that matter, what Cordova wanted from life. Did he want to go home one day?

"Jason is right," he said, calmly. "We have to win the war before we can organise the reformation of the Empire and for that we need the help of the rebel factions."

"I believe that most of them will help us," Hester said. The older woman was looking tired and drawn, exhausted by her labours. Colin had urged her to drop into sickbay for a medical examination, but Hester had refused, citing the need to get to work. "And combined, they can threaten the Empire."

"Until the Empire moves in reinforcements," Khursheda countered. "Let's face it; apart from this formation, the Shadow Fleet or whatever we wind up calling it, we have nothing larger than a heavy cruiser — and outdated heavy cruisers at that. Their modern counterparts will smash right through them."

"Given time," Salgak said, "we can produce new weapons and

starships that will tip the balance in our favour. The first units of the new class are already under construction." The cyborg's augmented head twisted from side to side. "The Empire will not be expecting us to develop new concepts, perhaps even new levels of weaponry."

"And you know that Imperial Navy Captains are not trained to expect the unexpected, let alone cope with it," Cordova said. He stroked his beard as his smile grew wider, contemplating the tactical possibilities. "We can certainly hurt them badly before they have a chance to adapt."

Colin lifted a hand and the room fell silent. "We have to run before we can walk," he said, feeling a wave of tiredness passing over his body. Once the fleet was underway to its next target, he promised himself, he would lock his quarters and get several days of proper rest. He shook his head inwardly, laughing at himself. The chances were good that he would never have any real rest until the war was won. "And, with that in mind, we need to decide on our next target — and indeed our overall plan for winning the war."

He hadn't intended to share the details of his planning with anyone, but it had been gently, if firmly, pointed out to him by Daria that showing his distrust too openly would cause others to react against him. Besides, if any of the men and women gathered in his quarters were traitors — or Imperial Intelligence spies — the rebellion was about to be terminated before it was even fairly begun. Pushing the dark thought aside, Colin keyed the terminal and brought up a star chart of Sector 117.

The Empire, for reasons that owed more to inter-Family scrabbles and disputes rather than common sense, tended to treat each sector as a separate entity, rather than acknowledge the realities of space. Two planets that were only ten light years apart might as well be on the other side of the galaxy from each other, if they were separated by an arbitrary sector line. Colin had never been able to understand why the Empire operated in such a fashion — the best theory he had been able to develop was that it suited the shipping lines — yet it had practical implications. The worlds outside Sector 117 were unlikely to have heard about the rebellion. If his calculations were correct, if Percival had chosen to keep the news of the rebellion restricted, the other sectors wouldn't be watching for his ships. They would have no idea that they *had* to watch for his ships. The thought of taking his ships over the sector line and wreaking havoc was tempting, but he pushed it aside. Admiral Percival had to be dislodged first, before the rebellion could spread.

He studied the chart, his mind automatically correcting for the slight misrepresentation of holographic displays. There were two hundred inhabited planets within Sector 117, but most of them were

effectively valueless, at least when it came to rebellion. Colin's fleet could destroy the orbital stations and the weapons platforms intended to discourage pirates from trying to hit the planet, yet what would it gain him? Nothing — and it would give Public Information a hell of a chance to discredit the rebellion. There were only fifty worlds that were important enough to merit being targeted — the remainder would fall into the rebellion's hands once Camelot had been taken — and none of them would fail to provoke a reaction from Percival.

"First," he said. "The main body of the fleet — under my command — will proceed to Piccadilly. We will use various tricks" — he wasn't about to go into any detail, even here — "to sneak in and then engage the defences from very short range. Once we have destroyed the orbital defences, we will take out the facilities on the surface of the planet and withdraw before we can be engaged and destroyed."

"Chancy," Cordova observed. "You end up stuck there and Percival's goons will kick your ass through the nearest airlock."

Colin couldn't disagree with the sentiment, however crudely Cordova chose to express it. Piccadilly was not only a valuable world in its own right — the Roosevelt Family had been developing the world and transforming it into a major industrial node, although his capture of the Annual Fleet would have hampered its further development — but it was within thirty light years of Camelot. Percival would, assuming that he had a force on stand-by, be able to dispatch one of his own superdreadnaught squadrons to intercept. And then…

The thought made him smile. His force would have its flicker drives powered up and ready to go. They'd simply flicker out as soon as the enemy ships arrived, yet… one lesson that had been hammered into his head back at the Academy was the KISS Principle. Keep It Simple, Stupid. The operation would infuriate Percival and drive his patrons into a frenzy of hate and fear, forcing them to demand that Percival did the impossible and capture or kill Colin. And yet Cordova was right. Too much could go wrong too quickly.

"We'll remain on alert to flicker out if the shit hits the fan," Colin assured him. It didn't begin to express his own doubts and fears over the operation — and he suspected that Cordova knew that — but it would have to suffice. "Percival will simply be unable to intercept us."

Cordova didn't bother to argue, so Colin moved on to the next part of the operation. "Khursheda, you will take command of the battlecruiser squadron" — calling a unit of five battlecruisers and six heavy cruisers a squadron was pushing it, but it had to do — "and go pay a call on the ICN network. The message has already been prepared, along with the codes that will allow it to disseminate

through the ICN, without Percival being able to do a thing about it."

"Of course, sir," Khursheda said. The thought of action had galvanised her, even though she'd only been a Commodore for the last two weeks. Colin had plenty of enthusiastic younger officers and crewmen, but he was short of experienced commanding officers and he was unwilling to risk bringing in too many strangers from the Rim. Some of them, he knew, would be Imperial Intelligence operatives, or perhaps they would have been cashiered for very good reasons.

"Don't risk your ships," Colin added. "If you find yourself in a position to exchange fire with Percival's ships, don't unless you have a heavy firepower advantage. We cannot afford to lose you."

"Thank you, sir," Khursheda said. Her dark face seemed to light up. "We won't let you down."

"Excellent," Colin said. He looked up at Cordova. "You have the most interesting part of the operation." Cordova smiled, as if he already knew what Colin was going to say. "You will be raiding the enemy's smaller interests and mining facilities."

"Behaving like pirates," Cordova said. He sounded vaguely disapproving, although the way he stroked his beard suggested that he enjoyed the thought. Indeed, looking at the outfit he wore, Colin wondered if Cordova thought that he was a pirate king. It was possible… yet, unlike most pirates, there were no atrocities to Cordova's name. Or perhaps, he thought in the privacy of his own mind, no *known* atrocities. "My crew will doubtless enjoy the chance to loot."

Colin nodded, hiding his disapproval. He wasn't too surprised — Cordova and his ship had been fugitives from the Empire since before Colin had been working for Admiral Percival — yet it was somehow disappointing, like finding an idol unexpectedly tarnished. And then, Cordova would also have command of many of the starships that had been donated to Colin's cause — including many real pirates, hiding under the rebellion's flag. Perhaps Cordova was the right choice after all; his reputation would never allow him to turn a blind eye to atrocities. He guarded his reputation like the older spinster women of the Thousand Families guarded their honour.

"Which leads neatly to another point," Colin added. "No atrocities. I want there to be none at all. I want you to make it clear to your men that I will punish any atrocity in the harshest possible manner, even if I have to hand them over to the Empire myself. We cannot allow anything to blacken our reputation."

"Public Information will turn us all into dangerously insane terrorists, whatever we do," Hester said, her voice harsh and unfeeling. "Whatever it takes to overthrow and destroy the Empire, we will do it. The Empire will not allow us to tell our side of the

story."

"The rumour mill will be more accurate," Colin said, refusing to allow either of them to distract him. The Empire might have its own version of events, an official version that would be slavishly followed by every media outlet in business — if they wanted to remain in business — but the rumour mill, running through starship crews and groundside officers, would be much more accurate. A fake atrocity, one created from whole cloth by Public Information to discredit the rebellion, would be noticeable. A real one, however, would *also* be noticeable. The rumour mill would carry the word that Public Information, for once, had told the truth. "We do not have a choice."

He looked up at Cordova, holding the bigger man's eyes with his own. "No atrocities," he repeated. "I am counting on you to ensure that they do not take place."

"There will be no atrocities," Cordova promised. His booming voice admitted of no doubts, or fears. "If any under my command dare to prey on helpless captives, I will kill them personally, in a manner so horrific that none will dare to follow in their footsteps."

"Good," Colin said. He wasn't about to admit it, but allowing Cordova to command the additional starships would get two headaches out of his skull. Cordova would have a command consummate with his status and Colin wouldn't have to worry about breaking highly-independent ship crews into something reassembling military discipline. "Hester… what is the status of insurgent cells on Imperial worlds?"

Hester looked thoughtful. Colin had asked her before, several times, but she had always been reluctant to discuss the issue. Colin, occupied with other matters, had allowed that particular matter to slide. It wasn't something he could do any longer.

"There are hundreds of cells on hundreds of worlds that are willing to rise up against the Empire," Hester said, in her whispery voice. "And yet, they know that if they rise, they will be killed. The Empire will come and put the rebellion down as brutally as possible and the survivors will be crushed under grinding taxes."

Colin nodded. Even the Empire, which had a limitless supply of men to convert into Blackshirts, had difficulty maintaining a sizable force on the surface of each and every world in the Empire. But then, it didn't matter. There were plenty of planetary populations that could have destroyed the Blackshirts in a single night, only to discover the Imperial Navy's superdreadnaughts flickering into their system and coming to lay waste to their worlds. Hester was right. The insurgents would not risk showing their hand until they knew that their world was secure.

"We can start slipping more weapons into their bases," Colin said.

If nothing else, the Rim was awash in weapons, from ones manufactured by hidden colonies to weapons that had been diverted from the Empire's stores. "And then they will be ready when we finally capture Camelot and liberate the sector."

He looked up. He was tired, so tired, yet he was also happy. After everything he'd done to reach this point, there was still no end in sight… but he was no longer alone.

"I have faith in us," he said, hoping that his words would inspire. "We can win this war. We *will* win this war."

* * *

The spy had been growing impatient for the last four days, waiting for a chance to get off the asteroid. No such luck; the resistance leaders had insisted — in a rare display of unanimity — that no one was to leave until they had completed their business and departed. The spy cursed their logic as much as she admired their effectiveness. She could have warned the Empire that an attack was about to be launched — even though she had no idea of the target — if only she could get off the asteroid!

As calmly as she could, she returned to his work and waited. There would be a chance to slip back onto one of the more well-known asteroids soon enough, and then she could make contact with an Imperial Intelligence undercover team. And then, the spy told herself, there would be a chance to stop the rebellion dead in its tracks.

Chapter Twenty

For a crazy few minutes, just after *Onslaught* had flickered into the Jackson's Folly system, Penny had thought that the mutineers had returned to the system and engaged the Imperial Navy. Five superdreadnaughts were posturing at a smaller task force of four superdreadnaughts and assorted smaller ships, going through a ballet that was both complex and extremely simple. The absence of weapons fire and the IFF signals transmitted from the superdreadnaughts revealed — to her slight embarrassment — that the starships were doing something rarely seen in the Imperial Navy, random drilling.

It wasn't, she noted as her battlecruiser linked into the datanet serving as umpire for the duel, a live-fire exercise. The Imperial Navy frowned on live-fire drills, both because of the cost and because of the danger. Penny had been a child when the crew of a superdreadnaught had accidently armed a missile within the launch tubes — they'd somehow cut it free of the safety systems that should have prevented the missile from arming before it was launched — and detonated it inside the ship. The superdreadnaught had survived the blast — it was lucky that the other warheads had not detonated, as that would have vaporised the entire ship — yet her Captain had been unceremoniously cashiered from the service and her entire surviving crew had been blacklisted. Imperial Intelligence, according to some of the files she'd seen ever since she'd become Percival's aide, had suspected it was deliberate sabotage, but the people responsible had died in the blast. There was no way to know for sure.

By the time she was welcomed onboard Commodore Rupert Brent-Cochrane's command ship, she was actually quite intrigued by the results of the exercise. Everyone knew that superdreadnaughts couldn't be beaten by anything less than a matching force of superdreadnaughts, yet Penny had wondered before if that was actually true. The Imperial Navy's sole combat duties for the past few centuries had been swatting pirates, hunting rebels and raining missiles on helpless planets. It didn't exactly encourage innovation and creative thinking, while the rebels — already badly outmatched — had one hell of an incentive to get as creative as possible. She barely noticed when the shuttle landed in the superdreadnaught's shuttlebay and only looked up when she realised that Commander Figaro, the superdreadnaught's XO, was waiting with a party of senior officers. Penny, who had never been piped onboard a ship before, accepted his salute with some surprise and allowed him to escort her to the Commodore. Brent-Cochrane, it seemed, was not in the CIC, but in one of the smaller compartments, chatting to his

subordinate commanders over the datanet.

The nine superdreadnaught commanders didn't look happy, even before Figaro opened the hatch and announced Penny, before withdrawing at speed. Penny could understand their unease; quite apart from an unprecedented set of war games, they were holding the post-battle assessment over the datanet, rather than meeting in person. Some of them, she realised, looked particularly unhappy. She guessed that they'd been on the losing side.

Brent-Cochrane looked at her, winked at her as soon as his eye was out of sight of the various holograms drifting in the compartment, and then turned back to his subordinates. "We will be holding another comparable drill tomorrow," he warned, dryly. "I expect that each and every one of you will do better, or else."

He tapped a switch and the holograms vanished. "Captain," Brent-Cochrane said, turning so that he could look up towards Penny. His face split into a remarkably skewed grin. "Would you believe that four superdreadnaughts could beat five?"

Penny wouldn't have, but there was no point in disagreeing with him. Brent-Cochrane might be a mere Commodore, yet he had connections that reached back into the Empire, connections that would allow him to squash an uppity commoner-born officer, even if she was an aide to an Admiral. Besides, the part of her that remained a professional naval officer was keenly interested. The fleet was rarely allowed to hold any kind of unformulated war games.

"It turns out that they can," Brent-Cochrane said, waving her to a chair. His grin only grew wider. "You see, the four superdreadnaughts were backed up by swarms of smaller ships, all of which added their own point defence fire to the battle — and all of which were deemed expendable. The five superdreadnaughts simply lacked the firepower to punch through that wall of point defence before it was too late."

He clicked his fingers as his stewardess arrived. "Natasha," he sang out. "A glass of the finest Amber Dark for me and another for my guest, at once, if you please."

Penny frowned inwardly as the stewardess vanished out of the hatch and returned with two wine glasses and a tall thin bottle, from which she poured a blue liquid into the glasses. Penny was mildly surprised to see her — stewards and stewardesses were one of the perks of being a senior officer, yet they normally stayed in their master's quarters and away from the CIC. The stewardess was short, which very pale hair and a near-golden face. It was fairly certain, Penny was sure, that she was Brent-Cochrane's lover.

She took one of the glasses and sniffed it carefully, as tradition dictated, although she was sure that someone as well connected as Brent-Cochrane would never stoop to serving an inferior brand. Amber

Dark originated on one world — the vines couldn't be transplanted to another world — and was so expensive that only the highest of the high were able to afford it. Penny had only tasted it once before, when she'd been at a formal ball with Percival, and she had been impressed. It was the finest wine in the Empire.

Brent-Cochrane lifted his glass and met her eyes. "Confusion to the rebels," he said, and took a sip. No one would swill Amber Dark as if it were a cheap beer. "I trust that you like it?"

Penny took a sip of her own, using the motion to mask her confusion. Brent-Cochrane was being friendly, too friendly. He'd welcomed her onboard, had her piped onto his ship by no less than the ship's XO and even invited her into his private flag compartment. If she'd been a very well-connected person, she would have suspected that Brent-Cochrane wanted to impress her, yet why would he bother? Penny had nothing that Natasha — or plenty of other women — had. Why, then, was he attempting to seduce her… and, for that matter, just what did he want?

"It's very sweet," she said, honestly. She took a second sip, feeling the silky taste billowing over her tongue, and then put the glass down on the nearest table. Natasha moved in to refill the glass. "The Admiral has some orders for you and your squadron."

"Let's be honest, shall we?" Brent-Cochrane asked, taking another sip himself. "You're the one who gives the Admiral ideas he turns into orders, are you not?"

Penny swallowed several responses that came to mind. Somehow, having Brent-Cochrane — of all people — put it into words cut through all of her defences. Percival was a known problem; he was a brutal sadist and incompetent, yet she knew him. Brent-Cochrane was someone she knew far less well. She dared not show him any hint of her real feelings, but somehow she was certain that they had already moved far past that stage.

"I cannot say that that is really surprising," Brent-Cochrane said. He was staring into his glass, watching as the light blue liquid seemed to spin around, catching and redirecting the light, but she was sure that he was watching her carefully. "The *dear* Admiral" — his voice had become mocking, a form of mockery that he would never have dared use to his face — "is responsible for the mutiny. Oh yes" — seeing her expression and mistaking it for surprise — "our lord and master betrayed the chief mutineer and then failed to make sure that he was truly broken. I wonder what his superiors would make of that."

Penny picked up her glass and took another sip, trying to sort through her conflicting feelings. "It's quite a problem for him," Brent-Cochrane continued, when she seemed unwilling to continue

speaking. “If he fails to contain the rebellion in time — before it spreads — he is likely to end up getting the blame and his patrons will be the first to blame him. The Roosevelt Family isn’t going to back him now, not when their interests are the worst affected. I wonder… what will he do then?”

His gaze sharpened. “And what will you do, I wonder, when Percival crashes and burns?”

“I do not know,” Penny admitted. She had never felt so vulnerable. Like it or not, she had linked her career to Admiral Percival’s career — and if he fell, so too did she. His family might ensure that he received a posting somewhere well away from everyone else — or perhaps arrange a quiet retirement for him — but they wouldn’t bother to do anything for her. She would be lucky to be allowed to resign; it was far more likely that she’d be turned into a scapegoat for Percival’s failure. Five years of helping him, of trying to steer him away from mistakes and allowing him to indulge his unnatural lusts with her would have been for nothing.

“I could help you,” Brent-Cochrane said, surprisingly. Penny knew better than to think he was offering out of the goodness of his heart. There would very definitely be a quid pro quo involved somewhere. “You could transfer yourself to me.”

Penny felt her eyes narrow. “And what will happen to you if Percival falls?”

Brent-Cochrane leaned back in his chair, projecting complete unconcern. “If the Admiral falls,” he said, “he will carry the blame for the failure. I, as one of his subordinates, would be in an excellent position to move up, perhaps even to take his place as Sector Commander. My family would definitely prevent him from trying to slip the blame onto me. Even if I didn’t get the position, I would still be in a far better place than anyone else.”

Penny considered it. It seemed fairly likely that Brent-Cochrane was actually right. Even if he wasn’t, it might just allow her a chance to escape the fall of her patron without ill effects. Or perhaps she was deluding herself. When different patrons clashed, it was always their clients who bore the brunt of the fighting.

The thought wasn’t a cheerful one. She’d seen enough, from working at Admiral Percival’s shoulder, to know that the patronage system was the only thing keeping the Empire together. Parliament was a joke; the independent judiciary had been penetrated and broken by the Thousand Families in so many ways. And, of course, there was no Emperor. The Thousand Families, she suspected, would one day reach a point where they could no longer expand, or extend their networks of patronage any further. She had no idea what would happen then, but she was fairly sure it would be bloody. The

Thousand Families would turn on one another and the Empire would burn in the crossfire.

"You might be right," she conceded, finally. If he wanted to be blunt, she could be blunt too; besides, it was slightly refreshing. Percival would never allow her to speak freely. "What are you offering me?"

Brent-Cochrane didn't look offended at her directness. "At the moment, I wish you to report to me — privately — on the doings of our lord and master," he said. "When Percival falls, I will take you under my wing and have you assigned to my staff. I may even be able to get you a command of your own. Or, if you wish, I could pay you; a few hundred thousand credits would ensure that you no longer needed to serve in the Imperial Navy."

Penny kept her face expressionless as she ran through a series of thoughts in her head. The money wouldn't be any protection if things went sour unless she had it switched into an untraceable credit account, changed her name and vanished. Even then, Imperial Intelligence would probably be able to track her down. It was tempting to cling to what remained of her integrity, yet the truth was that she had none, and had none since she had first started to whore herself to Percival. It was a bitter thought.

And there was no point in giving her loyalty to a man who would show her none.

"I accept," she said, tightly. Brent-Cochrane's eyes flickered with delight. "I'd like both the credits and the placement, once the Admiral has fallen."

"Of course," Brent-Cochrane said. It would be small change to him, of course. He could have paid her far more without needing to worry about his bank balance. His eyes fell on her uniform jacket. Unwisely, she'd worn one of the tighter outfits and she could feel his eyes leaving trails of slime all over her breasts. "And there was one other thing I wanted…"

Penny nodded slowly and started to unbutton her jacket.

* * *

Afterwards, unlike Percival, Brent-Cochrane started to get dressed again almost at once. He had to have given some kind of signal to the outside world — although Penny had seen nothing — and no one had interrupted them during their brief tryst. Penny was relieved about that — even though it wasn't as if she had any dignity left for a voyeur to steal — yet she wished that she were alone. She needed to think and think hard. And she wasn't sure why Brent-Cochrane had

insisted that she give herself to him. Had it been a way to pressure her, to remind her of whom she now belonged to, or was it more primal, an attempt to beat the Admiral by sleeping with his lover?

"So," Brent-Cochrane said, once he was dressed. Despite his reputation, he hadn't hurt her, although he hadn't gone out of his way to make her happy either. Penny had a great deal of experience in faking it and she was sure that he was convinced that she had enjoyed herself. It didn't hurt that, compared to the Admiral, Brent-Cochrane was Casanova himself. "What does our lord and master wish for me to do?"

Penny flushed, trying to finish pulling on her jacket. "He wants you to be in a position to intercept the rebels when they attack their next target," she said. The stupid jacket was refusing to button up properly. She cursed it as she felt for the buttons and forced them into place. "He thinks that your fleet should be sufficient to take on and beat the rebels."

"Oh, he does, does he?" Brent-Cochrane said. He seemed amused by her struggles with her rebellious jacket. "And did he hire a clairvoyant to predict where the rebels are going to hit next, or does he intend for me to pick a world at random?"

Penny finished pulling on her jacket and produced a small comb from an inner pocket, working on her hair. Brent-Cochrane had, unsurprisingly, wrecked her hairdo. "He has a handful of worlds that he believes are likely targets," she admitted. "He wants you to guard Greenland."

"He picked the worlds, or did you?" Brent-Cochrane asked, dryly. Penny flushed again. It seemed that having a superior officer who knew just how smart one actually was could be dangerous. "I would like to know how you chose them."

Penny explained, not bothering to give the Admiral any further credit. She'd looked at the worlds in Sector 117, following her hunch that Commander Walker would seek to harm the Roosevelt Family and humiliate Percival, and sorted out twenty-one worlds that would make possible targets. She'd separated nine of them because they were heavily defended with fixed defences, including some that would deter a superdreadnaught squadron unless they really wanted to take the world. The rebels, without a major shipyard under their control, probably wouldn't consider them serious targets. That left twelve possible targets.

"I like the logic," Brent-Cochrane said, finally. "Why does he want me to guard Greenland in particular?"

"Stacy Roosevelt insisted on it," Penny said, remembering that discussion. She would personally have put Greenland in the lower tier of possible targets, but Stacy had insisted and the Admiral — of

course — had backed her up. “Please tell me you’re not going to grovel to her too.”

“The Roosevelt Family has strong connections to my family,” Brent-Cochrane said, with a snort. “I don’t have to do anything for her and she knows it.”

He turned back to the private terminal as Penny checked her appearance in a small pocket mirror. All traces of their love-making were gone, as if it had never happened. “But Greenland is only one of several possible targets,” he continued, “and the rebels might avoid it purely because of its strong Roosevelt connection. Commander Walker” — he winked, reminding her that he blamed Percival for the mutiny — “may follow the same logic and *avoid* Greenland.”

Penny shook her head. “So what do we do?”

“First, we leave the drones here, as the Admiral ordered,” Brent-Cochrane said, thoughtfully. “This is a terribly determined world, but the Blackshirts will crush their determination eventually — they always do. Its butcher’s work and they’ll love it. The assault cruisers can give them the firepower they need to make sure they don’t actually lose their foothold on the surface. And then we go here.”

His finger tapped a location in interstellar space. “You see, I don’t trust Percival to understand that we weren’t to blame if the rebels hit elsewhere,” he said, dryly. “We’ll wait here and dispatch destroyers to the nearby systems. If the rebels hit them — and that includes Greenland — we will flicker in behind them and bring them to battle. If not…”

He smiled, inviting her to share the joke. “If not, it isn’t as if *we* can be blamed, is it?”

“No,” Penny agreed. With his connections, scapegoating him would be difficult, particularly if he *was* clearly only doing as he’d been told. “We were only following orders.”

Chapter Twenty-One

The Piccadilly System was one of the choicest pieces of real estate in Sector 117. With one habitable world and two more that could be made habitable by some intensive terraforming, it would one day boast a population in the billions. The two large gas giants and three asteroid belts orbiting further away from the primary provided raw material and fuel for a growing space-based industry, all under the control of the Roosevelt Family. The Family had claimed the world for their own, shipped in a few million settlers who had signed very long-term contracts with the Roosevelt Family and its clients — and just started to build, Fifty years after the system had been settled, it was one of the jewels in the Roosevelt's Family's crown.

Colin reflected on that as the *General Montgomery* and the other superdreadnaughts flickered into existence, a handful of light seconds from the planet itself. On the face of it, there were good reasons for the Roosevelt Family to take a strong interest in the star system, yet his instincts were telling him that there was something more to it that the files — both the official files and the secure files they'd captured from Stacy Roosevelt — were saying. The Roosevelt Family seemed to have poured a disproportionate amount of resources into the system.

"We have emerged, sir," the helmsman reported. Colin smiled to himself. The display had lit up, showing the system, which proved that they had arrived, yet doctrine demanded that the fleet officers point out the obvious. It wasn't that bad an idea — it ensured that officers always knew what they needed to know — yet he had always disliked it. "All drives are cycling down now, as per orders."

"Hold them at two minutes," Colin ordered. The superdreadnaught had built up a vast charge of power to jump ten light years into the system and it would take time to build up another charge to jump them out. The drives would become overstressed if he held them at two minutes for too long, but it would last long enough to allow them to flicker out quicker if they ran into something they couldn't handle. "Tactical; I need a system display."

"Yes, sir," the tactical officer said. He worked his console as the main display continued to update. At least the Roosevelt Family didn't look as if they were trying to hide anything; the hundreds of asteroid mining ships were easy to pick up, at least as long as they were emitting IFF beacons. Colin doubted they'd keep identifying themselves once they realised that enemy ships were loose in their system. "No enemy ships within combat range."

"Good," Colin said. He settled back into the command chair, feeling the tension levels rising on the bridge. He'd brought them into

the system some distance from the planet, which should prevent the local defenders from panicking and opening fire, yet if the next part of the plan went wrong, they'd have a clear shot at his ships. "Communications… transmit the modified IFF signal to System Command."

"Aye, sir," the communications officer said. She tapped her own console, transmitting the pre-recorded message. Colin had worked hard on it and he was proud of it, although it was far from perfect. Unless Admiral Percival was a greater fool than even Colin believed, his first step when he learned about the mutiny should have been to order all the IFF codes and clearances changed. "Signal sent."

Colin smiled to himself. He'd calculated that the defenders of Piccadilly would probably know the other superdreadnaught squadron commanders by name, so he'd cloaked his squadron in the guise of a squadron from Sector 99, a sector on the route inwards towards the Core Worlds and Earth. The chances were good that whoever was in command of the system wouldn't actually know the person Colin was impersonating, although now he was heading towards the system's defences the idea was suddenly starting to seem rather less clever. If the enemy commander had balls as well as good connections — and realised that something was badly wrong — he would keep his nerve, welcome Colin's fleet to the system, and open fire with everything he had the moment Colin entered weapons range.

It had taken several days of research to pull the entire message together, days in which he'd learned more about how the Roosevelt Family operated than he'd expected. Indeed, he had seriously considered copying the data files and then sending them to the Roosevelt Family, if only to taunt them with the depth of Stacy's failure. He'd refrained after Daria had pointed out that Stacy would probably seek to conceal the loss of her secret files and could be relied upon not to alert her superiors. Colin doubted that Stacy could get in worse trouble, but he'd accepted Daria's suggestion. Who knew — maybe Stacy *would* conceal it successfully.

He contemplated the vision of the planet, growing on his private terminal, and frowned inwardly. There was nothing to suggest an explanation for why the Roosevelt Family considered it so important, yet there were plenty of signs of their interest. The planet was orbited by three Capital-class orbital defence stations, each one with the mass of a superdreadnaught — and no need to use some of that mass on drives and shields. Colin would not have cared to bet on the superdreadnaught against a single fortress, although the superdreadnaught would be able to pick the time and place of the engagement — and the orbital fortress was a sitting duck. Each of the fortresses bristled with missile launchers and energy weapons — and,

if those were not enough, was surrounded by smaller automated platforms. The Roosevelt Family might have no clear reason for such largess, yet they had no reason to doubt their own security. His lips twitched. Perhaps the real explanation was that certain senior members of the Family wanted a place to live, away from the rest of the Empire. Stanger things had happened.

The defences had one flaw, however; one that Colin had noticed the moment he brought up and studied the first images of the defences. Actually, they had two, but the second one was one Colin dared not count upon, certainly not for anything vital. Unlike a fleet of superdreadnaughts, the Fortresses were in fixed locations and couldn't move, unless they happened to have a fleet of tugs in the general area. If Colin's plan worked, he could bring his fleet into engagement range of one of the fortresses, while the others wouldn't be able to engage him because of the mass of the planet in the way. Unlike Earth, which had a double layer of orbital fortresses, Piccadilly had only three. Under normal circumstances, they would have more than sufficed to take care of any trouble.

"We have received a response from System Command," the communications officer said. "They are welcoming us to Piccadilly and are inviting you, specifically, to dine with the Planetary Governor once you make orbit."

Colin chuckled to himself, sharing a grin with his Flag Captain. The signal they'd sent had purported to be from Commodore Reginald Kennedy, a man whose entire family was a Roosevelt Client. Indeed, they'd been clients of the Roosevelt Family for so long that they'd actually developed patronage networks of their own, which were in turn networks that could be used and exploited by the Roosevelt Family. If Colin was any judge, the Roosevelt Family might refuse to see the Kennedy Family socially, but they'd be quite happy to work with their clients otherwise. And Commodore Kennedy was a known factor.

The planet's second weakness was one that Colin had puzzled over, before resolving to data-mine the planet's computers — once the war was over — and try to ferret out the answer. Unlike most of the other worlds in the sector, Piccadilly was defended by forces owned and operated by the Roosevelt Family, not the Imperial Navy. The Empire as a whole might frown on anyone else — even a Family — owning and operating superdreadnaughts, but they didn't try to forbid the Families from owning smaller ships. The Roosevelt Family hadn't hired the Imperial Navy, even under Percival's command, to guard their planet; they'd gone to the expense of obtaining their own fortresses and starships. Even for an entity as wealthy and powerful as the Roosevelt Family, that wasn't small change. It would have made a

noticeable dent in their fortunes.

His lips twisted into a smile. Household Troops — even ones crewing starships and orbital fortresses — were loyal to their Family, not to the Imperial Navy and they wouldn't think it necessary to take the precautions that an Imperial Navy officer would take. Perhaps, Colin hoped, including allowing a superdreadnaught squadron far too close without confirming the identity of the commander and his crew. They would consider the word of a Roosevelt Client more important than any warning from the Imperial Navy.

"Thank them for me," Colin said, "and tell them that I will be delighted to accept."

He watched as the communications officer keyed the program, sending the second false message. Luckily, they were too far from the planet for a real conversation, although as they slid closer to the world and the time delay fell, he suspected it would become harder to maintain the masquerade. If they found someone who actually *knew* Commodore Kennedy… well, by that point they'd better be in weapons range, or they'd just have to flicker out and try again somewhere else.

Colin pushed the thought aside, sitting back in his command chair and trying to appear relaxed, even though his heart was pounding so loudly that he was surprised no one else could hear it. This was it, the fleet's first real mission against a tough target. The Annual Fleet hadn't been expecting an attack when Colin had opened fire; the penal world hadn't stood a chance, even if they had dared to offer resistance. This was the first attack where Colin could expect to lose some of his ships, perhaps including a superdreadnaught. And a defeat at this stage would be disastrous.

"Launch three stealth probes," he ordered. Luckily, the planet's defenders didn't feel like chatting. "I want to make sure that they have nothing stealthed awaiting us."

That, too, was a gamble. If they brought up active sensors, someone on the other side would ask the obvious question — why? An alert tactical officer might realise that Colin's fleet wasn't behaving as if it was on a courtesy visit. Yet… if they had starships — like one of Percival's other squadrons of superdreadnaughts — hidden away under cloak, they could spring an ambush before Colin realised that they were there and reacted. The stealth probes were a compromise, allowing him to gain some extra insight into the system without tipping his hand. He hoped.

"Aye, sir," the tactical officer said. Stealthed probes were expensive, which was partly why the Empire rarely deployed them except on truly vital occasions. In theory, they were undetectable, but Colin's experience with cloaking devices had told him that there was

always turbulence, the disturbances in local space caused by the passage of a cloaked ship. “I’m launching probes now.”

Colin nodded. The first probe would head down towards the planet — reporting its findings via tightbeam laser transmissions — while the other two would orbit the squadron, watching for trouble. The main display, even using the passive sensors, was still updating itself; the more Colin looked, the more he felt puzzled, even unsure. The Roosevelt Family had built no less than three cloudscoops, which should provide enough fuel for a far greater industrial sector than he was seeing. The thought nagged at him. What, he wondered, were they trying to hide?

On impulse, he patched into the communications console and studied the image of the dispatcher talking to his communications officer. He wore a red, orange and green uniform that clashed appallingly with his colour, an outrage against fashion, even to Colin’s limited fashion senses. That, too, wasn’t uncommon among the Household Troops. Their masters liked them to look striking, to remind the universe of their power and wealth, even if they did end up looking ridiculous. Colin bit down a snicker. The enemy officer looked rather like a trifle on legs.

His humour died. Or perhaps, he wondered, that was the point all long.

* * *

Specialist Bart Roberson didn’t have a very demanding job, although he wasn’t a very demanding person. He’d trained in the Imperial Navy as a sensor specialist, before the Roosevelt Family’s recruiters had seen his file and made him an offer he couldn’t refuse. If he joined the Household Troops, he could have a far higher salary and the chance to play with the latest communications gear; if he refused, he could be assured of a transfer to a cold and deserted asteroid monitoring station on the far edge of nowhere. He’d agreed, biting down his anger, only to discover that he’d been posted to the far edge of nowhere anyway. Actually, that was harsh; whatever else could be said about Piccadilly, it wasn’t a bad place to live and work. Two of his subordinates were actually young natives of the planet — their families were clients of clients, as he understood it — and he’d spent some time down on the surface himself. There were nice homes, nice people and even nice fishing!

He frowned down at his console, puzzled. System Command on Piccadilly normally didn’t have a very challenging job. The system was supposed to be off-limits to non-authorised ships, leaving his main

task monitoring asteroid miners and the warships that protected the system. The arrival of an entire squadron of superdreadnaughts had been a surprise, but at the same time it had been surprisingly reassuring. No one, apart from the Imperial Navy, was allowed to build and deploy superdreadnaughts.

And yet there was something wrong. He was sure of it. The nine superdreadnaughts seemed to be legit, with the proper IFF codes, but something kept nagging at his mind. He had the galling feeling that if he'd had some proper military experience, he would have *known* what was wrong. He couldn't place it at all.

"Sir," he said, slowly. "I think you should take a look at this."

Commander Darius Falcon looked over his shoulder. The Commander wasn't a bad person, although he refused to mingle with his subordinates and seemed to have the delusion that he was an aristocrat himself. Personally, Bart didn't give a damn. The Thousand Families ran the Empire and if they had all the power, at least they weren't trying to crush his soul. They'd even done him a favour, of sorts, when they'd brought him into the Household Troops. He would certainly not have received such a high salary in the Imperial Navy.

"They're legit," the Commander said. "What is it about them that is puzzling you?"

"I'm not sure," Bart admitted. The Commander didn't have any more military experience than Bart did — he'd got his post through connections — and he might not have understood. "There's just something wrong about them."

On impulse, he brought up the display and showed the feed from one of the live sensors. The superdreadnaughts were lumbering forward — there was little beauty or grace in their movements — and heading right towards Alpha Station. Under Alpha, in a lower orbit, the massive orbital docking station waited, its crews already preparing to receive the superdreadnaught squadron. The Roosevelt Family would probably be quite happy to allow their client's crew to have leave on the station, even if they didn't allow them to go down to the planet.

And the superdreadnaughts were coming closer and closer.

"You're not exactly an expert in superdreadnaughts," the Commander pointed out. He wasn't being unpleasant; he was merely stating a fact. It was one of the traits that made him bearable, unlike some officers Bart could have named. "They might not be…"

It struck Bart, just a second too late. "Those ships," he gasped. Now he saw it, he wondered at his own slowness in accepting it. He should have seen it at once. "They're in *attack* formation!"

* * *

Colin watched on the display as Alpha Station grew in front of him, a manmade moon bristling with weapons and defences. Not unlike a superdreadnaught, or an Imperial Navy starship in a suspect star system, it had its shields and weapons on alert, although they weren't powered up and ready for launch. The station itself was ugly, a strange bulky shape that suggested sheer power and iron determination. The weapons scattered across its hull only made it look incredibly unwelcoming.

"Passive systems only," Colin ordered. So close to the station, they would detect an active targeting scan the second he ordered it. And then they would flash-charge their shields and open fire. It wouldn't matter; the station was emitting enough energy to allow him to target it, even without active sensors. The first warning they would have would be when his missiles were fired from his ships, roaring towards the station at incredible speed. "Lock weapons on target."

"Weapons locked, sir," the tactical officer said, very quietly. There was something about the brooding presence of the station that forced them to whisper, even though there was no way that sound could travel through a vacuum. "The missile tubes are ready to open on your command."

Colin nodded. The external racks were loaded, of course, but that wasn't unusual when a squadron left one sector for another. The enemy wouldn't think anything odd about that. Their radars, however, were sweeping across the superdreadnaught's hull and might well pick up the opening tubes. He shrugged. They were committed now anyway.

"Open the tubes," he ordered. He braced himself, knowing that time had run out, before tapping his console and unlocking the weapons. He'd just put the trigger in the hands of his tactical officer and other junior staff. "You may fire at will."

The tactical officer keyed a switch.

A second later, the superdreadnaught launched its first massive barrage towards the station.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Bart watched the attack develop on his console, too late.

All nine superdreadnaughts opened fire, eight of them targeting Alpha Station with every missile they could bring to bear on the station, while the ninth opened fire on every automated weapons platform and orbiting sensor within reach. The cloud of missiles — they were too densely packed for his systems to provide him with an accurate count — had been fired, just seconds before Alpha Station snapped over onto high alert. At such short range, their drives could be boosted into sprint mode and accelerate within seconds of being launched, making it far harder for the defenders to calculate intercept vectors and start targeting point defence before it was too late. It wasn't impossible to intercept missiles in sprint mode, it was just extremely difficult — and, naturally, the rebels weren't going to sit around and wait for the defenders to react. They were going to continue pressing their advantage.

Bastards, he thought, as Alpha Station's shields started to charge up. It would be nice to think that perhaps, just perhaps, the formidable fusion reactors onboard the station could power the shield generators enough to hold off the onslaught, but he knew better. The shield generators would burn out if they were forced to absorb or redirect so much power, something that would bring the interlocking generator network crashing down. The station's point defence started to engage, pumping out plasma bolts and railgun rounds as if there was no tomorrow — which there wouldn't be for the defenders — yet it was already too late. The missiles were roaring towards their targets.

"Get the drones out," the Commander ordered, frantically. He hadn't seen; he hadn't understood. Bart understood. Alpha Station was going to be badly damaged, at the very least; the odds weren't good that any of the crew would survive. No amount of drones — automated gunboat-sized craft — would change the odds. "Get the automated platforms online."

"They're online," Bart assured him. The missiles the ninth superdreadnaught was launching were tearing through the network, expending an entire shipkiller on each of the undefended platforms. A part of Bart's mind admired the precision of the attack. Platforms that might have helped save Alpha Station were being forced to devote their energies to remaining intact. It didn't seem to make much difference. The missiles were entering terminal attack range now. "I think we need to think about evacuating."

"Nonsense," the Commander said. It had just dawned on him that

he was in command of the defences of the entire system while an attack was underway. If he survived, if the enemy was beaten off, he would be promoted. “There is no reason to believe that they know about this facility.”

Bart had to admit that he was right. The Roosevelt Family — in a direct break with tradition — had placed their System Command on the planet’s surface, under a mountain. If the enemy wanted to kill them, he would have to find them first — and then it would take several shipkillers to batter a way down to the bunker, or collapse the mountain on top of it. The planet’s ecology would be badly damaged. Of course, if they *were* Imperial Navy starships up there, they’d probably scorched entire planets before. Wrecking a single continent would be nothing compared to that.

He looked back up at the display. The missiles were finally hitting their target.

* * *

There was something raw, almost primal, about the explosions billowing up on the massive station’s defensive shields. Colin watched, struggling to keep his face expressionless, as the missiles exploded in wave after wave, knocking down shield sections and burning out shield generators. Bursts of energy were making their way through the shields as they failed, licking and burning their way into the station’s armour, further weakening the structure. The station, which was better armoured than even the latest superdreadnaught design, might well have a chance to survive. Its shield network was knocked down, yet it sprang back into place. They had power and shield generators to spare.

The fortress had barely had a chance to spit back a single salvo of missiles before its shields failed completely, allowing Colin’s missiles to pound the fortress’s hull without hindrance. Nuclear explosions flared out in the darkness of space, melting their way into the heart of the fortress, yet still it survived. The interior of the fortress was heavily armoured too, meaning that Colin could blow parts of the fortress into radioactive debris and the remainder would continue to fight on. Other warheads were detonating inside the structure — he wouldn’t have given much for the safety of the fortress’s personnel — tearing into its very heart. Entire sections of weapons failed, dying just before their base started to twist and explode. The fortress didn’t explode like a starship. It simply fragmented into countless pieces of junk.

A testament to what the Empire can build, Colin thought, impressed

despite himself. The Empire had never lost a Capital-class orbital fortress. Coming to think of it, the last time the Empire had lost *any* kind of fortress had been back during the First Interstellar War. Since then, the Empire had always been doing the attacking. It had rarely been attacked itself. Unlike a starship, with weight penalties for packing too much mass into the hull, the fortress had been able to pack far more armour. The designers had known what they were doing.

"Record a message," he ordered. The communications officer nodded. "Attention, defenders of Piccadilly. This is Admiral Colin Walker of the Popular Front to Reform the Empire. I intend to destroy this system's orbital facilities. I will give you ten minutes to abandon them and then I will open fire."

The superdreadnaught shook as a missile from one of the automated platforms managed to slip through the point defence and explode against the ship's shields. "There will be no further warnings," Colin added. "The countdown will begin upon the transmission of this message."

He looked over towards the communications officer. "Transmit the message on all bands," he ordered, tartly. "We may as well give them fair warning."

Colin, Hester and Daria had discussed the issue in some detail. Hester had pointed out that the Roosevelt Family's workers were certainly compliant in the crimes the Family had committed, but Daria had countered by pointing out that they hadn't been offered a choice. Colin had settled the argument by reasoning that the orbital facilities could not be rebuilt quickly — certainly without a new Annual Fleet — and destroying them would limit the world's ability to take part in the war. By the time the facilities were rebuilt, he hoped, they would have won or lost — and if they lost, it didn't really matter what happened on Piccadilly.

Besides, he added in his own mind, unlike Stacy or Percival himself, he felt no rage for the workers. They had never committed crimes against him personally; their sole crime, if it could be called a crime, was being part of the system.

"The message has been transmitted," the communications officer said. "No response."

Colin shrugged. He hadn't expected one. "Monitor the orbital facilities closely," he ordered, as the superdreadnaught shook again. "Let me know if they seem reluctant to evacuate."

He smiled as he studied the display. Percival would probably not have hesitated to use human shields and would have seen any concern for the workers as a sign of weakness. He doubted that the Roosevelt Family's representative on the planet's surface would be that stupid, if

only because it would be a good way to lose all of the Family's clients at once. A trained and experienced workforce wasn't something to just throw away; besides, Colin had no intention of slaughtering helpless workers. If it could be avoided, that was.

The other two stations, as he had expected, weren't firing — but then, there was little point in firing. Colin's ships were shielded by the planet itself. The remaining warships in the system were attempting to reform into a new formation, although several of them were missing, probably having flickered out to warn other systems of just what had gone wrong. Colin glanced down at his terminal, watching the counter ticking towards zero. His worst-case estimate was that it would take at least thirty minutes for Percival to dispatch reinforcements into the system… and *that* relied upon him having forces on hand, ready to go.

He ran through a tactical check. His ships had been hit, but none badly — although that would change if they tried to go up against the remaining fortresses. There was no point in trying to take the system; the only thing they could do was wreak havoc and then take their leave. He checked that the tactical staff were handling the running battle and pulled up the sensor records. No matter how he worked it, there seemed to be nothing special about the planet, certainly nothing that explained the trillions of credits the Roosevelt Family had spent on it.

Colin tapped a switch, transferring the records into a secure datachip he could give to Daria — perhaps she could shed some light on it — and turned back to his task. The enemy warships seemed to be heading away from the planet's gravity well, and then they halted, as if they were waiting for Colin to give chase. He saw no reason to indulge them. His superdreadnaughts couldn't catch the lighter units in normal space and they'd just flicker out if he got too close anyway. It looked… odd.

"Launch an additional flight of probes," he ordered. "I want to know if they move even a single cloaked ship close to us."

"Yes, sir," the tactical officer said. There was no longer any need to use stealthed probes. "Launching probes… now."

"*Incoming fire*," the deputy tactical officer said. "The stations are firing on us!"

* * *

"Relay the control signals through the warships," Bart ordered. It was a far from conventional idea, yet it seemed to be the only way to drive the rebels away from Piccadilly. Their countdown was proceeding, marking the fact that his world had only two minutes

before years of investment were destroyed, blown to flaming atoms by rebel starships. “I want them to focus the missiles onto their targets.”

“Do as he says,” General Roosevelt added. He’d come into the command station, relieving Commander Falcon. The fortresses had raised objections when a lowly Specialist had asked them to start routing their commands through the starships. “This isn’t the time for a argument over procedure.”

Bart smiled. The starships and orbital fortresses had one thing in common; they both had to control missiles they launched, in order to direct them towards their targets. A rogue missile became a danger to both sides in a battle. A superdreadnaught could control vast numbers of missiles at once — using command missiles to ensure a degree of tactical flexibility — but a cruiser or a destroyer had vastly more limited capabilities. Bart had pointed out that the stations might not be able to launch their missiles directly at their targets, but they could send them around the planet, handing over control to the warships in observation positions. It had taken some reprogramming to make it possible — the Empire wasn’t keen on making it possible for outside forces to take control of its missiles — yet they’d done it.

The system wasn’t as efficient as it would have been if the stations had been in direct control of their weapons. The smaller ships kept losing control of individual missiles, even though they were routing their commands though slaved command missiles and attempting to switch from missile to missile before they lost them permanently. Even so, it had been a nasty surprise for the rebels, all the more so because they were being fired on from all sides at once. Bart had redeployed the ships to allow them to control multiple missiles, even ones circling around the planet from the other side.

It was risky, he admitted; a shipkiller hitting the planet would be disastrous. There were good reasons why the Empire disliked missile duals anywhere near a planet’s gravity well. Yet, if it worked, it would drive the rebels away and it had been *his* idea. *He* was the one who would be rewarded.

“They can probably swat them off indefinitely,” the Commander said. He was pacing, doubtless worried about the effects on his career. “We cannot hope to overwhelm their defences at this range.”

“That’s not an issue,” the General countered. “All that matters is to keep them off balance until reinforcements arrive.”

* * *

Colin swallowed a curse as the missiles roared into his point defence network and started to die under his fire. At first, he’d

thought that the Empire had slipped a pair of battlecruiser squadrons into orbit under cloak and opened fire, but it hadn't taken long to realise what was actually happening. Some clever bastard on the planet's surface had managed to get the warships working to steer missiles fired from the station!

"Clever," he said, as the last of the first salvo of missiles died. The attacks were growing in power now as more ships were added to the command network. The attacks were even coming in from odd directions, as if they were fighting in a two-dimensional environment. If he sent his ships after the control ships, they'd simply flicker away, leaving his ships at the mercy of the fortresses. He checked the timer and smiled to himself. The defenders had run out of time. "Did they get everyone off the orbital facilities?"

"I believe so," the sensor officer said. "They certainly launched a great many shuttles and lifepods, all of which are now heading down into the planet's atmosphere."

Colin nodded. Standard procedure was for lifepods to remain in space until they could be recovered, but he didn't blame them for sending them into the atmosphere to land on the ground. In a combat zone, the odds of having them mistaken for weapons or mines and accidentally destroyed were just too high. Besides, it helped prove that the stations were definitely abandoned — unless, of course, they deliberately intended to trick him into carrying out an atrocity. Percival thought like that; he hoped — prayed — that the Roosevelt Family thought differently.

"Target the orbital stations," he ordered. The tactical officer brought up the firing plan, the one that they had worked out just after Alpha Station had been destroyed. "Destroy them."

"Aye, sir," the tactical officer said. "I am launching missiles… now."

Given enough time, Colin would have preferred to use energy weapons to destroy the orbital facilities, but time was ticking away. Besides, using missiles helped ensure that fewer chunks would survive the fall through the planet's atmosphere to crash-land on the surface. He watched dispassionately as years of work and trillions of credits burned under his fire, wondering how long it would be before the Roosevelt Family could rebuild. They had probably had the planet's facilities insured, but if he knew the Thousand Families, there would be caveats built into the agreements. And besides, if they attempted to pay out, it would probably wreck large parts of the economy.

"The targets have been destroyed," the tactical officer reported, finally. "The enemy fortresses are increasing their fire."

Colin was mildly impressed. Whoever had thought of that tactic was on the wrong side. He doubted that it was a tactic that would

become commonplace, yet perhaps… it would certainly make hitting any planet harder. He shook his head in irritation. It wasn't as if they had a monopoly on tactical innovations. If they were lucky, Admiral Percival would decide that the genius who had thought up the idea had been too clever and dispatch him to a remote mining colony… no, that wouldn't happen. Whoever had thought of it would be working directly for the Roosevelt Family. Percival would only have limited authority over him.

"Take us up," he ordered. They'd dallied too long already. "Prepare to flicker us out as soon as we reach a safe distance."

Unsurprisingly, the incoming fire doubled as they pulled away from the planet, the fortresses realising that their prey was escaping and trying to cripple or destroy a superdreadnaught before they could escape. Colin didn't bother to return fire. At such extreme range, it was unlikely that they would hit any of the smaller starships, while the fortresses might as well have been invincible. It would just be a waste of missiles.

He pulled up the planetary data again and shook his head. Why *was* the planet so important?

It made no sense. The survey data didn't suggest that the planet had played host to intelligent life before the Empire had stumbled over it and given the settlement rights to the Roosevelt Family. Studying alien tech made sense, yet an alien race advanced enough to be worth the effort of studying it would be clearly noticeable from orbit, even if it had died out centuries ago. And besides, the survey data would have noticed the alien settlement and an Imperial Navy team would have taken over the planet. Was it a crashed alien ship, perhaps? Also possible, yet why wouldn't they take it into the Empire, to somewhere more secure?

And what else was worth the amount of resources they'd lavished on the world?

"We have reached minimum safe distance, Admiral," the helmsman said. "The flicker drives are powering up now."

Colin took one final look at the mysterious planet, vowing to come back one day and ferret out its secrets. If he'd kept Stacy Roosevelt as a prisoner, perhaps he could have asked her… he shook his head, annoyed at himself. There was no point in questioning his own decisions, not now. What was done was done.

"Take us out of here," he ordered. The other timer had reached zero. Percival's reinforcements could be expected at any moment. It was tempting to spend time wrecking the cloudscoops and mining facilities, but it wouldn't assist the cause. "It's time to take our leave."

Chapter Twenty-Three

"It's the flicker drive node, My Lady," Accrington said. "I'm afraid that it has finally given up the ghost."

Lady Hannelore Ellicott-Chatham scowled. The *Misfit* was one of three freighters, her own personal property, that she'd assigned to the mining project at Tyler's Star. Unfortunately, the ship was also older than she was and on its last legs. The only reason it had been so cheap was because the owner had thought he was selling it for scrap.

"So the freighter cannot jump outside the system," Hannelore said, carefully. She had a fairly comprehensive education in mining technology — her mother and father had taught her never to depend on outsiders to run crucial family businesses — but she couldn't have put a flicker drive together even if someone had given her the parts and detailed instructions. "Can we still use it inside the system?"

"Oh, sure," Accrington assured her. "The hull is as sound as it was when we bought it" — Hannelore snorted; that hadn't been very sound — "and there's nothing wrong with the life support. It's just the flicker drive."

"Very well," Hannelore said, straightening up. "Put the ship on internal system duties until it finally gives up the ghost or we can scrape up the funds to have the flicker drive repaired."

"It would probably be cheaper in the long run to buy a whole new ship," her chief engineer said, as he wiped his hands on a grubby towel. "The older ship isn't going to last forever."

Hannelore contemplated the loss of the *Misfit* as she strode through the freighter's cramped passageways and out into the asteroid habitat she'd converted into a base of operations. Calling it a habitat was a bit of a stretch, but she didn't care about rocky walls, dodgy life support and unidentified smells in the atmosphere. It was her home and would remain her home until she returned to Earth in triumph, or finally gave up and joined the Moochers, the army of disinherited heirs who lurked at the edge of the Thousand Families, more than commoners but less than aristocrats. She couldn't imagine a worse fate and her natural optimism kept her going, yet it seemed as if the universe itself was conspiring against her. All her hopes and dreams seemed to be on the verge of failure.

Tyler's Star had been judged worthless when the Imperial Navy's survey service had passed through the red dwarf system, pausing long enough to catalogue the small handful of asteroids and the single small gas giant before moving on to more prosperous systems. Hannelore — searching for a place to try to build a fortune — had other ideas. The system had two great advantages; it had no local

population and a suitable source of power, the star itself. And, if the economic predictions for Sector 117 bore out, a person who just happened to control a cloudscoop and an asteroid mining facility would be in a position to carve out a niche for herself. Hannelore wanted that very much.

She'd been the product of an arranged marriage between two families, both small families who had dreams of merging and becoming a greater one. They'd ordered two of their youngsters to marry and produce a heir, but their dreams had shattered long before Hannelore had reached her majority. Powerful factions within both families, fearing that they would be disinherited in favour of the newcomer, had torn the alliance apart, leaving Hannelore adrift. Her parents might have been divorced, yet they'd always been kind to her, but that kindness had limits. Hannelore was that unfortunate person who could not be denied a place in the family, but was also an embarrassment, a reminder of plans that had simply never come to fruition. She had grown up among the Thousand Families and rapidly learned to hate most of the younger members, both the ones who pretended sympathy for her isolation and the ones who acted as if she was tainted, as if what had happened to her was a deadly disease that could rub off on them. Hannelore had sought an escape and found one, more or less by accident. It had required almost all of her trust fund from her family, but she'd gone ahead with it anyway. A successful mining project would give her the leverage to rejoin her family on her terms, or allow her the independence she had always craved.

The thought made her smile bitterly, for both her parents had been adamantly opposed to their daughter taking her inheritance — such as it was — and heading nearly six months from Earth, in the company of common-born miners and engineers. The miners were hardly suitable companions for a young girl, her mother had twittered, while her father had warned of the dangers of a pirate raid taking her alive. If she was lucky, the family would have to pay a hefty ransom; if she were unlucky, she would suffer a fate worse than death. And, so far, the worst that had happened was a steady decline in her assets and financial trouble on the galactic market.

Her concept had seemed brilliant, at first. The asteroid miners worked for the Thousand Families, often paid low wages that allowed their superiors to fix the prices of asteroid ore. Hannelore had calculated that if she established a completely independent mining colony, she could charge whatever prices she liked, including undercutting all of her competitors. The Roosevelt Family would not be amused — she had been careful not to allow them any stake in her enterprise — yet what could they do about it? They couldn't crush her

through their network of patronage, for that would bring the wrath of every other family down on their heads. The Thousand Families couldn't afford to turn on one another, or the commoners would see the infighting and start getting ideas.

She smiled again, a more relaxed smile, wondering what her mother would say if she saw her daughter now. Hannelore wore a grimy shipsuit, her blonde hair cut back into a short mop surrounding her head… and she looked as if she hadn't had a bath in weeks. She hadn't, come to think of it, water was rationed on the platform until they finished melting down asteroid ice and inserting it into the system. Hannelore had no intention of abusing her position; she could never have explained it to her mother, but she liked the engineers and miners she worked with more than she liked her friends back home. At least the miners weren't plotting her social death every time they looked at her.

The asteroid's control centre barely rated the name. Her engineers had rigged up a fusion reactor, a handful of consoles and a display they'd pulled out of a freighter that they'd actually had to scrap, after using it as living quarters for the first few weeks. The thought was galling; if she'd had full access to the family funds, she could have provided much better equipment and they wouldn't be risking their lives every time they used some of the older gear. Once she got the whole complex up and running, once she started funnelling supplies to various worlds… *then* she would be in a position to claim her rightful place.

"We're going to have to cut back in 445-67," Jackson said. He was a burly miner, exactly the sort of person her mother had warned her about. He would have been handsome, at least o her eye, if he hadn't used an illegal genetic re-profiling system at some point and wound up looking like a biological experiment gone horrendously wrong. Hannelore had wondered — she had never dared ask — just what he'd had in mind. It looked as if he'd gone three rounds with an angry crocodile-analogue and the creature had won. "The mining team have filled all their baskets."

Hannelore nodded, sourly. "At least we can send the *Misfit* to pick up their load," she said, studying the display and calculating times in her head. She hadn't even thought about distances in normal space until she had come to Tyler's Star. The flicker drive normally made every location in the system only a few seconds away, but only her freighters carried FTL drives. The mining ships were confined to normal space. "And then transfer it over to another ship or even one of the storage asteroids."

She scowled as she looked at the storage asteroid. They'd attempted to turn a rocky-iron asteroid into a genuine habitat, but the

survey had missed impurities in the metal and the asteroid had burst when they'd tried to expand it. It made a source of raw materials and a storage point, yet it was a dark reminder of her failure. Her first of many failures.

"Of course, My Lady," Jackson said. Unlike most of the other miners, Hannelore had never been able to get him to abandon formality. "We can…"

He broke off as an alarm sounded on one of the displays. "My Lady," he said, as he twisted the console around so she could see the icons, "there is an unidentified ship within the system."

Hannelore bit down a very unladylike word. No one was supposed to visit Tyler's Star. There was nothing in the system to attract visitors, not even the Imperial Navy or pirates. There was nothing in the system worth stealing, at least not yet. Hannelore had intended to invest in some defensive satellites when she had the mining complex up and running, but the funds were too limited to invest now. Besides, covering an entire system was a nightmare. It was simply impossible without thousands of platforms.

"Can you identify it?"

"Not with this gear, My Lady," Jackson said. He had a past that remained shrouded in mystery, but he clearly knew his way around a tactical console. There were times when she wondered if he was a deserter from the Imperial Navy. "The ship isn't transmitting any IFF signals and these systems aren't good enough to pick up much more information."

Hannelore rubbed her forehead, cursing her luck. The Imperial Navy wouldn't have bothered to sneak around her system, which meant that the intruders almost certainly had to be pirates. If they were just from the black colonies, trying to remain undetected, they wouldn't have come so close to her complex. Hell, why would they even bother to come close to the star when there were thousands of light years of interstellar space to use as a meeting point, without any risk of detection? No reason came to her tired mind.

"Hail them," she ordered. If they knew that they'd been spotted, perhaps they would flicker out and withdraw. Pirates weren't known for bravery, if only because the Imperial Navy executed them upon capture. "Ask them what their business is and how we may assist."

"Yes, My Lady," Jackson said. He turned to his own console and spoke rapidly, pushing as much confidence into his voice as he could. Hannelore had been tempted to speak herself, but letting the pirates know that there was at least one woman in the complex wouldn't have been such a great idea. They might have gotten a few ideas. "I don't think they're listening."

Hannelore nodded. The unknown ship was still arcing towards

her complex, ignoring the message and the outlying mining ships. Whoever was in charge had probably surveyed her complex under cloak and deduced that the centre — her command asteroid — was the only valuable point in the system. The miners would have to surrender or die in the vacuum of space when their air ran out… if the pirates didn't just blow the asteroid and leave them to die.

"Sound the alert," she ordered, and then changed her mind. There was nothing they could do to deter the pirate ship from attacking, if they intended to attack. "Belay that; warn section leaders, but don't sound a general alert."

If Jackson disagreed with her logic, he didn't show it. "Yes, My Lady," he said, and started to work at his console. Hannelore envied him dreadfully suddenly; if she had something to do, she wouldn't have had to stare at the incoming icon and worry about what its crew might have in mind. She understood, suddenly, what her father had meant when he had talked about the loneliness of command. She was responsible for the seventy-two miners and engineers she had hired and transported to Tyler's Star, promising them wealth, reward and patronage — if only they succeeded. And, by doing so, she had brought them here to die.

Jackson looked up suddenly. "My Lady," he said, "we are receiving a transmission."

Hannelore braced herself. There would be no hiding the fact that she was a woman now, or the fact that there were other women on the platform. "Put it through," she ordered. "Let's hear what they have to say."

A face appeared in front of her. The image was massive, as if the sender was focusing the camera directly on his face, rather than allowing her a chance to see his bridge. The man had long blonde hair — longer than her hair — and a beard that seemed to defy any hope of organising it properly. The effect seemed to create the impression of a dashing rogue, although it was partly spoiled by the fact she could see every motion on the face. If the speaker frowned, or twitched, she would see it.

"Lady Ellicott-Chatham," the speaker said. Hannelore's lips twitched. Technically, she was Lady Hannelore, for there was no Ellicott-Chatham Family. The failure of the planned merger and her parents' separation had seen to that. Indeed, someone of a legalistic bent could make a convincing case that she shouldn't even be considered a Lady at all. "I am Captain Jason Cordova, representing the Popular Front for the Reform of the Empire."

"That's a bit of a mouthful," Hannelore said, before she could stop herself. There was something about the speaker, Captain Cordova, that seemed to encourage informality. If nothing else, it certainly

suggested that he didn't have looting, raping and pillaging in mind. "I have never heard of the Popular Front."

"The whole universe will know of us soon," Cordova promised. His booming voice carried with it unlimited confidence, the kind of confidence that only nature's aristocrats possessed. Some of the family brats Hannelore had known had it, but it was rare outside the Thousand Families, at least from what she'd seen. Her lips twitched again. She hadn't seen *that* much of the galaxy outside the Thousand Families. "I'm afraid that I'm going to have to ask you to surrender your facilities."

Hannelore felt a sudden hot wave of anger flowing through her, but she clamped down on it mercilessly. There was no point in getting angry, not now. She didn't quite dare. "You're talking about wrecking the livelihood of nearly a hundred people," she said, the strongest argument she dared use. "If you destroy the platforms…"

"We have no intention of destroying the platforms," Cordova said. "We just wish to remove you and your crew from them for a short period of time, until the war is over." His voice hardened. "I'm afraid I cannot give you a choice in the matter."

Hannelore keyed the switch and looked over at Jackson. "Can we resist?"

His shrug was very droll. "We don't have anything to resist with," he pointed out. "If we say no, they'll either open fire or send in their troops to take us prisoner."

"Very well," Hannelore said, reopening the channel. There was no point in asking for guarantees, although even she had heard of Cordova's reputation. He didn't have anything like the reputation some pirates had. "We will transfer over to your ship and then seal the platforms."

* * *

An hour later, she found herself breathing in clean air as she stepped onboard the *Random Numbers*. Not all of her crew had been keen to surrender, but spacers couldn't allow themselves any delusions about reality and reality was that Cordova had the firepower to make any objections pointless and futile. Hannelore had considered trying to sneak away, using only gas thrusters in hopes of avoiding their radar, yet she'd ended up dismissing the idea. It simply wouldn't have worked.

"Welcome aboard," Cordova said. On the screen, he'd been remarkable; in person, he was striking, even stunning. His smile was so bright that it seemed to light up his entire face. It was easy to see

why his crew both loved and followed him, even into exile and certain sentence of death if they were caught. “I have taken the liberty of preparing quarters suitable for one of your exalted rank and station.”

“Thank you, but I would prefer to bunk with my crew,” Hannelore said. She had long ago lost the modesty that a young girl in the High City on Earth was required to develop — or at least pretend to develop. “I wish to make sure that they are not mistreated.”

“No one will be mistreated,” Cordova assured her. His smile grew wider. “And perhaps you would join me for evening dinner. There is much that you can tell me about Earth.”

Hannelore blinked in confusion. Why would Cordova want to know about Earth?

“I would be honoured,” she lied. It was quite possible that Cordova wanted to take her to bed instead. It wouldn’t be *that* uncomfortable — it wasn’t as if she were a virgin, or that he was unattractive — but it would have felt like she was betraying her crew. “And then you can tell me all about the Popular Front.”

Her father had told her, once, to learn everything she could. Knowledge was power, he’d told her, and power was always worth having. If she was to be Cordova’s guest — or prisoner — she might as well learn what he had to tell her, and how he intended to justify himself to the universe.

And besides, it might be fun.

“I would be delighted,” Cordova said. “Shall we say my quarters, at nine?”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Commander Khursheda Ismoilzoda — now a Commodore in the rebel fleet — knew that others saw her as prim and unimaginative. It was an appearance she had taken pains to cultivate, if only because — as a young, unattached and attractive female officer in the Imperial Navy — it provided a form of protection. The young sharks — high-ranking officers intent on cutting a romantic swath through lower-ranking officers and crew — could be discouraged if one looked stern enough. It had helped her rise — if slowly — through the ranks and had marked her as a safe pair of hands. Her tactic had worked until she had refused the wrong person and had been banished to Jackson's Folly.

Unlike Colin, who had personal reasons for rebelling against the Empire, Khursheda had grown up on Earth and learned to despise the Empire from a very early age. Earth's teeming billions lived in poverty, a poverty only made worse by the fact that their social superiors refused to allow them any chance to make their own decisions. The poor lived their lives without hope and, whenever they fell afoul of the Empire's laws, found themselves exiled into space. It was no wonder that there were so many applicants for newly-opening colony worlds… and that the Empire had logistical problems shipping so many people off-world. Millions departed Earth each year, only to be replaced by millions more born to poor and hopeless mothers. The poverty trap was grinding and almost unbeatable. Khursheda had beaten it by joining the Imperial Navy as a young girl and excelling in her training, to the point where she had been granted a commission and the chance to rise within the Navy.

As far as she knew, however, she was the last survivor of her family. Her parents had died when she was very young, killed in one of the endless gang wars that raged through Earth's teeming cities. Two of her brothers had been killed by the Blackshirts — she still didn't know why, despite searching though Stacy Roosevelt's files — and three of her sisters had been sold into sexual slavery by the time they reached their menses. They'd been lucky. Khursheda knew that there were children, boys and girls who were barely born, sold into slavery. And her sisters, like so many others, had been worn out and killed by their new job. Their pimps hadn't cared; they'd just gone on to the next few girls, of which there was an inexhaustible supply.

"Captain" — as there were so few trained command officers, Khursheda was serving as both Captain of *Lightning* and Commodore of the rebel squadron — "we have emerged within the Camelot System."

Khursheda nodded, feeling her heart starting to beat faster in her chest. Colin had given her the mission because she was reliable, yet now — so close to a force that could destroy her and her entire squadron — she wanted to flee and flee far. If Percival's crews were on the ball, if they had a squadron of superdreadnaughts on alert — or even a squadron of battlecruisers — her tiny squadron risked complete destruction. If it had been up to her, she would have preferred to carry out her mission somewhere else, but there had been no other choice. The geography of the Interstellar Communications Network dictated their actions.

"Remain on yellow alert," she ordered. They had emerged towards the edge of the system, safely away from any possible threat. Percival's sensors might have picked up their arrival, but he probably wouldn't think much of it, not when civilian ships appeared at the edge of the system all the time. A military starship with military-grade computers could risk jumping right into the heart of a system, yet few civilians would dare take the risk. There was too great a chance of appearing too far from one's destination. "Are there any threats within detectable range?"

Colin and Khursheda had discussed the possibility at length. If Percival was thinking ahead — or, more likely, someone in his employ was thinking ahead — he might just have a battlecruiser or two guarding the ICN station. It was what Colin would have done, if he'd had the forces on hand to cover all the bases. Percival might not have considered the risk worthwhile — after all, Colin might have turned up with his entire fleet and picked off a battlecruiser squadron — yet it was well to be careful. Khursheda had no illusions. She couldn't hope to outfight the Sector Fleet if it came after her.

"No, Captain," the sensor officer said. "The only object within detectable range is the ICN station."

Khursheda nodded. "Take us towards it," she ordered. She looked over at the communications officer. "Keep transmitting our false IFF signal. We don't want them getting suspicious and alerting higher command."

Colin's original thought had simply been to blow the ICN network and force Percival to devote additional starships to convoying information all over the sector. Daria — backed up by Hester — had put forward an alternative suggestion. There was no need to destroy the entire network, or even parts of it, when the rebels could put it to work on their own behalf. Khursheda didn't like Daria — there was something about the woman that rubbed her up the wrong way — but she had to admit that it was a good idea. It might even work.

The Geeks had reprogrammed her starship's IFF transmitter to pretend that it was a battlecruiser on detached duty from the nearby

Sector 99. Khursheda was fairly sure that, sooner or later, the Imperial Navy would cotton on to that trick and the IFF codes would have to be altered, but until then it should work neatly. She would have preferred to use codes from a starship known to be in the sector, yet there was too great a chance of one of the starships they encountered knowing that the ship they were impersonating was somewhere else. It was a risk, but a calculated one.

Part of her was depressed by how easy it was to start thinking of the loyalists in the Imperial Navy as enemies, but it wasn't hard to understand. The Imperial Navy had no shared loyalty, not when everyone knew that promotions happened because the promoted were well-connected, or were sleeping with their superiors, or other criteria that had nothing to do with merit. Khursheda, for all of her stern appearance, hadn't felt much loyalty towards the Navy as a whole. All she had needed was someone to encourage her to rebel.

"And then prepare our message," she added. "I want to transmit it as soon as they verify our identity."

* * *

Lieutenant Neil Schmitt loved his job. Most Imperial Navy officers would have regarded a transfer to the Interstellar Communications network as a demotion, if not a permanent career freeze, but Neil had never been particularly ambitious. All he really wanted to do was read his books and watch the universe go by, an aim made much easier by his new assignment. He'd been transferred over as a young Midshipman and, by volunteering to stay longer than he absolutely had to, he'd been granted promotion. From just another operator on the vast station, he had become its commander, a position that afforded him certain rights.

The Empire — and the Federation before it — had spent billions of credits on attempting to develop a workable form of faster-than-light communication. And, for all of their investment, they had nothing to show for it. In theory, there were plenty of ways to transmit a signal faster than light, but in practice the only way to do it was to have the message carried on a starship. It was incredibly frustrating for the Empire's rulers, who wanted to control their Empire, yet had to account for the massive time delay built into the system. If Earth had wanted to send a signal out to Camelot, it would take nearly six months for the message to reach its destination and then another six months for Earth to get any reply. It was partly why Admiral Percival and his fellow Sector Commanders received so much latitude, in an Empire that didn't think highly of individual initiative

and enterprise. They needed the authority to deal with a small crisis before it became a larger one.

Their first solution to the problem had been to decree that every starship had to carry a sealed message pod that would allow it to convoy messages between systems. The idea hadn't worked out too well in practice as starships were delayed, or rerouted, or simply 'forgot' to pick up the message packets. The second solution involved the ICN; courier boats would jump from system to system, pass on the message bundles to the ICN stations, which would in turn relay them into the system or onwards to another courier boat. The system was clumsy and inefficient, but it worked — and it had other advantages. With all messages being sent through the ICN, it allowed the Empire a chance to censor everyone's mail — or detect subversive messages before they were transmitted into the Empire.

It also had another advantage, as far as Neil was concerned. The Empire didn't allow its corporations — particularly the ones with weaker ties to the Thousand Families — or private citizens any access to unbreakable encryption. Neil could use backdoors engineered into the system to peek at the messages, and then covertly hold them back for a few days while using his insider knowledge to make bets on the stock market. Working with a few allies deeper within the Empire, they were able to use their advance knowledge to gain wealth or avoid loss — and, as long as they were careful, they would be completely undetectable. They were careful. They gambled normally and only bet high when they were sure of their ground.

He barely noticed the battlecruiser flickering into the system, for he was carefully writing a message to his allies. Admiral Percival had refused to release any news of the rebellion into the ICN, which meant that stock markets further into the Empire would be unaffected by the news — at least, so far. Neil was betting that Admiral Percival would keep it classified for a few months longer, which would allow him and his allies the chance to secure their own positions and bet high. When the news finally broke — and it would; the ICN wasn't the only communications channel — they would be in a good position to benefit. Best of all, it looked perfectly natural from the outside. No one would be able to tell what they were doing, even if Imperial Intelligence carried out a thorough investigation. He hadn't even had to hold any messages.

"Lieutenant," Midshipwoman Fanny said, interrupting his thoughts. He saw no reason for formality on his command deck, but Fanny was young and ambitious — and desperate to escape the ICN. She was also pleasant on the eye, so Neil saw no immediate reason to authorise her transfer. "The *Dauntless* is transmitting a long message packet, priority one."

Neil lifted his eyebrows. He didn't dare tamper with priority one messages — that would mean certain death if he were caught — yet even they had to be checked by the censor. He keyed his console, transferring the data packet to his own system, and swore aloud as he took in the headers. The message wasn't just priority one; it was tagged with an Imperial Intelligence sticker, ensuring that it would go right to the top of the system. Worse, the *second* tag ordered a general broadcast to everywhere outside the system, but not into Camelot itself until a certain time. He found himself scratching his head. Neil liked the ordinary and the message was as outside the ordinary as it was possible to get, at least without the battlecruiser opening fire and blowing him and his station to vapour.

"Interesting," he said, without committing himself to anything. The only reason he could think of for a blanket message was to ensure that *everyone* got it — at least everyone with the right code key to unlock the message. No, he realised, as he read through the final headers; the later tags contained instructions for the message to decipher itself, without the need for a code key. Someone wanted to broadcast a message to everyone within the Empire. The message would route itself through every last communications system it could reach, twisting and turning like a living thing. "I wonder why…"

"Sir, the battlecruiser is demanding a receipt," Fanny insisted. She sounded nervous. No lowly Midshipwoman would want to handle a message with tags that came right from the highest authority in the sector. "They want us to confirm that we will send the message as soon as the next courier boat arrives."

Neil scowled to himself, thinking hard. There was something *odd* about the message, odd enough to make him wonder if he shouldn't check with Imperial Intelligence's offices in the Camelot System before forwarding the message. Except… if the message was genuine, and he had no reason to believe it wasn't, he would get into considerable trouble by delaying it, even for a few hours. He knew the schedules of the courier boats by heart and there was no way he could get a signal to Camelot and back before the message had to be transmitted. If the signal was false, he would be a hero, but if it was genuine… he'd be lucky not to be assigned to a penal world.

And, even if the message *was* false, he would have ignored perfectly legitimate codes. Imperial Intelligence would not be amused, perhaps even punish him for ignoring them, even though he'd done the right thing. They would be looking for a scapegoat and he knew, from long experience, that shit always flowed downhill. He would be the one who received the blame. He agonised for a long moment, and then made up his mind.

"Copy the signal into a burst transmission to Camelot, then

transfer it into the buffer and transmit it to the next courier boat to arrive," he ordered, finally. Having prepared the groundwork, it was time to cover his ass. "I'll attach a message to it stating that I cannot verify that the message was approved by officers on Camelot. That should suffice."

"Yes, sir," Fanny said. Neil saw her jacket, carefully opened to reveal a little of her cleavage, and smiled to himself. Fanny was a survivor. There was no doubt of that. With a couple of patrons and perhaps some luck, she would rise high. "The next courier boat is due in two hours, seventeen minutes."

And would be gone again in two hours, thirty minutes, unless something went badly wrong with the drives, Neil knew. "Yes," he agreed, dryly. "We had better not delay then, had we?"

* * *

Khursheda watched from her ship as the ICN station accepted the message, copying back the message headers to confirm receipt. She said a silent prayer under her breath that the system would work perfectly, before looking up at the helmsman and ordering him to jump them out to where the rest of the squadron was waiting for them. They'd pushed their luck too far already.

The message headers did far more than just direct the message to its proper destination, she knew; they ensured that no one would attempt to unlock the message's encryption before it was too late. The message — a declaration of rebellion would be forever moving ahead of any warning, any order to stop the message and erase it from the ICN. The Empire would have to wipe it completely — which would be difficult, as it would be bouncing back to the sender every few weeks — and change all of the codes. One of the headers, one normally assigned to Imperial Intelligence, would ensure that the automated systems just allowed it to slip through the censors. No one would look at it, she hoped, and even if they did, they wouldn't be able to decrypt it in time.

She smiled as the battlecruiser flickered out of the system. The Empire insisted on maintaining complete control over the planetary datanets, although there were datanets — on Earth and the Core Worlds, mainly — that defied easy control. They could normally wipe any subversive message from the network without more than a tiny percentage of the planet's population seeing it. Now… the message the rebels had created included the codes that would tell the monitors to ignore it, to let it pass through without comment. The entire Empire would see the message and know that a rebellion had begun.

* * *

Neil watched without undue surprise as the courier boat flickered into the system, dumped a massive data packet into the ICN station's filters and accepted the transfer of an equally large data packet from Neil's crew. As he had expected, there was no word from Imperial Intelligence's base on Camelot. The courier boat waited long enough to recharge its drives and then flickered out, heading for its next destination. Neil turned back to his own work and pushed the message out of his mind. There were two corporate messages that he'd held back that had to be slipped into the next data packet, just in time to prevent anyone from wondering if they'd been deliberately delayed.

Nine hours later, just after he went off duty, had a long rest and returned to his station, a Blackshirt transport flickered into existence, right next to the station. Neil barely had time to wipe his own secured data store within the network before they stormed aboard, arrested him and his entire crew, transferring them to their ship. It seemed that the message wasn't real after all. Neil gathered that after the Blackshirt commander, who looked deeply frightened, had driven a fist into his chest while screaming obscenities at him. The message had been faked, using codes that shouldn't have been in private hands.

And, in the finest traditions of the Empire, the messenger was going to be shot.

Chapter Twenty-Five

"Let me do the talking," Brent-Cochrane said, as the shuttle slowly drifted into the massive orbital fortress's hanger bay. Penny gave him a single raised eyebrow, which made him smile. The way he was dressed, Percival might well have a heart attack on the spot, or find it hard to restrain homicidal impulses. "You stay quiet and pretend to be a good little aide."

Penny shrugged. Brent-Cochrane had worn the standard dark blue dress uniform of a Commodore, but instead of wearing the blue cap, he'd donned a shining white cap with gold braid. Traditionally, only the supreme commander of a particular formation — a mere squadron, even of superdreadnaughts, wouldn't be enough — would wear such a cap and wearing one to a meeting with the Sector Command was both an unsubtle insult and a subtle message to Percival's supporters. Percival would see it as a challenge to his authority, yet he could do little about it, not with the level of connections enjoyed by his younger subordinate. He would have to grin and bear it, although part of Penny hoped that he would suffer a heart attack and die.

The shuttle gently touched down and the hatch opened, allowing the air from the fortress to flow into their craft. Brent-Cochrane's personal bodyguard stood up and headed out of the hatch, making a circuit of the craft before he would allow any of Brent-Cochrane's staff to follow him into the hanger bay. That, too, was another subtle insult to Percival, an implication that Brent-Cochrane didn't trust his superior to organise his own security. Percival, an expert at the backstabbing and intrigue that made up the innermost circles of the Imperial Navy, would have no difficulty in understanding the message, although he would still find himself powerless to respond.

"Clear," the bodyguard said, finally. If there was any doubt in his voice, Penny couldn't hear it. "There's a reception party waiting for you."

The small party stood to attention as the Empire's Anthem started to blare out, played through the speakers. Brent-Cochrane stepped from the shuttle, every inch the visiting monarch, and strutted to the far end of the line. The welcoming party was commanded, Penny saw with an inner flicker of doubt, by a mere Lieutenant. That, too, was an insult, one calculated to annoy the impulsive Commodore. Brent-Cochrane showed no visible reaction, even to her; he accepted the young officer's salute and returned it with his own.

"Lieutenant," he said, calmly and with perfect poise. "Permission to come aboard?"

“Permission granted, My Lord,” the Lieutenant said. He looked relieved; Penny knew how he felt. There were cases of visiting officers being offended by their reception party and demanding immediate punishment, or breaking careers effortlessly because they felt that their pride had been slighted. “Welcome onboard.”

Brent-Cochrane smiled. “Thank you,” he said. “Would you care to escort us to the Admiral’s quarters?”

The Lieutenant bowed and nodded, dismissing the welcoming party with a wave of his hand and turning to lead the two of them out of the hanger bay. Brent-Cochrane dismissed most of his party — he’d given them orders to mingle with the station’s crew, but remain on call — and allowed Penny to precede him as they walked though the station. The station was so massive that even Percival hadn’t been tempted to try to decorate it all in his own favoured style — the cost would have been shockingly high, even to someone with far more exalted connections — but she saw some of his paintings and artworks scattered around, announcing his control over the station. She wondered, sometimes, what the lower decks thought of their supreme commander’s taste in artwork, although no one gave a damn about their opinions — least of all Percival. The lower decks were there to do the dirty work and then remain out of sight, out of mind. The Imperial Navy only tolerated a few Mustangs — officers from the lower decks — every year.

Penny considered as she walked, contemplating the two men in her life. Percival was a sadist and a sexual pervert, yet in his way he was simple and easy to understand. The longer she spent in Brent-Cochrane’s company, the harder she found it to understand him. He was intelligent, capable, competent and — unlike Percival — interested in her for her brain, rather than her body. After their first coupling, he had never touched her again. It struck her as odd.

Or perhaps it wasn’t so odd, she reflected. Men liked playing their dominance games and Brent-Cochrane was playing one, not with her, but with Percival. Sleeping with Percival’s woman might be nothing more than yet another attempt to beat Percival, even though Percival would never find out about it. Brent-Cochrane might have a grand scheme to dislodge Percival from his position, yet in his mind, he already had. Or perhaps he trusted in his patrons and his undoubted ability to control his ships. He was simply too valuable for Percival to dispose of him.

Penny’s lips tightened as she fought to get back into the old ways of thought, adding an extra sway to her hips and tightening her jacket. The courier boat had found the squadron four days ago, ordering Brent-Cochrane to abandon his position and bring the squadron to Camelot with all possible speed. That, she was sure, meant bad

news… or perhaps Percival had his own plan to get rid of his uppity subordinate before things went badly wrong for him. Or perhaps he was just missing Penny in his bed… no, that couldn't be the answer. He could have ordered any of the young female officers into his bed and no one would have cared — well, no one who mattered. The Imperial Navy wouldn't have cared in the slightest as such abuses of power were common, even winked at by senior officers.

Brent-Cochrane had been furious, although his fury hadn't been as raging hot as Percival's had been, when she'd been slapped or beaten by her superior. She could understand his position, for they'd been working on training the squadron, only to discover that most of the commanding officers were unsuited for their position. The Empire rarely gave superdreadnaughts to officers with imagination — they might have the imagination to use them in rebellion against the Empire — and Brent-Cochrane's subordinates had the collective intelligence of a dead fish. She smiled at the thought; perhaps it was a little harsh. The collective intelligence of a dying scorpion, doomed, but still able to kill with its sting. If something happened to him, his subordinates would fight on, with all the intelligence and competence of a newly-minted cadet entering the Academy.

The Lieutenant paused outside the Admiral's outer hatch and pressed his thumbprint against the scanner, opening the hatch and allowing them access. He stood aside, waving them through — it seemed that junior officers were still not allowed into the Admiral's quarters — and closed the hatch behind them. Four Blackshirts, carrying stun batons and sensor needles, stepped forward and ran the needles over their bodies, looking for hidden surprises. Penny concealed her own surprise. Percival had to be feeling paranoid… or perhaps he was making another subtle insult, implying that he didn't trust Brent-Cochrane not to harm him. Penny almost snorted at the thought. Brent-Cochrane's plans for harming his superior officer, at least as far as she knew, didn't include his physical murder.

"They're clean," the first Blackshirt reported. He was a burly man, with piggish eyes; indeed, Penny wondered if the training process had included shots of Gorilla DNA. His voice, a thick guttural sound, was an unmistakable mark, the results of the drugs that had been shot into the recruits when they entered the training camps. They ensured both obedience to lawful authority and unquestioning brutality to everyone else. "No bombs, no guns; only a single dress sword."

"Then show them in," an impatient voice snapped. Penny felt her heart skip a beat as Percival's voice echoed through the compartment. "Now, if you please."

Penny allowed Brent-Cochrane to precede her into Percival's inner compartment, taking the additional few seconds to gather her

thoughts. Percival had altered the décor slightly, moving the submissive blonde woman to a new place on the wall and replacing it with… she leaned forward, unable to believe her eyes. The new picture was one of a man being unceremoniously strangled by the hangman's noose. She fought down the urge to vomit, trying to understand why Percival had placed it in such prominence, or why he would want to sleep under it. Or why, for that matter, he would expect *her* to sleep under it.

"They failed in their duty," Percival said, without bothering with formalities. That might have been intended as yet another insult, but she suspected, from the angry tone of helpless fury in his voice, that it was simply an oversight. "They failed in their duty and, because of them, the whole Empire knows about the rebellion."

That was physically impossible, but Penny decided that it would be better not to point that out to her enraged superior and lover. Brent-Cochrane didn't have the same scruples, yet even he kept his mouth shut, watching and waiting to see which way Percival jumped. Being so close to him was like being close to a caged animal, one that could turn on her and rend her to pieces at any moment. The whole compartment seemed to be charged with negative energy.

"The rebels accessed the ICN," Percival said, when he had calmed down enough to speak straight. "They managed to get a message into the buffers here — in this system — and upload it into the courier boats. They will have told all the other malcontents and dissidents and ungrateful populations about their rebellion and invited them to join up! The rebellion will spread far and wide."

Penny kept her face composed, although she risked a glance at Brent-Cochrane and saw the — barely-hidden — look of cold calculation on his face. Percival's real motive for keeping the news of the rebellion concealed had never been to avoid giving encouragement to the other rebels out there, but to save himself from the vengeance of an angry Empire. If he had managed to beat the rebels before the news got out, he would look like a hero, rather than the moron who managed to lose nine superdreadnaughts to a rebel commander with a grudge against him personally. The Empire would want his head and his connections, even if they risked defending him, would be unable to save his head from the chopping block.

"So the message is out and spreading," Brent-Cochrane said, once Percival had finished explaining. Penny had to admire the tactic, even though it made her life much more dangerous. The message would be forever moving in advance of any message ordering the ICN to wipe it from the local nodes. Worse, even if they did manage to quarantine a few systems and prevent them from getting the message, it would still slip in through other starships in transit. "That may not be such a bad

thing."

Percival glared at him. Penny had a good idea that she knew what was going through his mind, but he wouldn't explode in front of Brent-Cochrane, not when his subordinate would gleefully take it to his superiors.

"It is a disaster," Percival said, flatly. "It is a disaster so great that I had the entire crew of the ICN station executed for dereliction of duty." His voice became strident, hectoring. "We cannot allow any leeway when it comes to punishing traitors against the Empire!"

"That seems a little harsh," Brent-Cochrane observed, mildly. "Do you want them to make a habit of opening sealed packets from Imperial Intelligence?"

"They *failed*," Percival snapped. He clearly wasn't open to rational thought. Someone had to pay the price for the embarrassment and humiliation the Empire had suffered, even if he had to drum up charges and execute them quickly before anyone else could intervene. "The entire Empire knows now!"

His face darkened before anyone else could speak. "And the rebels hit Piccadilly," he added. "The Roosevelt Family is not happy."

Penny felt an insane urge bubbling up within her and she indulged it. "I hardly see how we can be blamed for that," she said. Piccadilly had been high on the list of possible targets she'd drawn up, although Stacy Roosevelt's insistence that Greenland be protected had prevented her from having any pickets near the other Roosevelt world. Besides, it was the Roosevelt Family, not the Imperial Navy, that was responsible for defending Piccadilly. "*We* were not guarding that world."

"The problem," Percival said with an air of patience that fooled no one, "is that the rebels have managed to strike at the heart of the Roosevelt Family's investments in this sector, which are vital for the continued economic growth of the Empire. Combined with their message, it sends a… disagreeable signal to the remainder of the Empire. The effects could be disastrous."

"The rebels have to be stopped," Brent-Cochrane said, with an air of artful nonchalance. "I fail to see why losing a single world is such a problem. There are thousands of other worlds in the Empire."

Penny thought she knew. The Roosevelt Family had invested heavily in Sector 117, it was why they had so much influence, even to put Percival in as their choice for Sector Commander. And their senior representative in the Imperial Navy, Stacy Roosevelt, had been jumped ahead of more qualified officers and ordered to capture Jackson's Folly and its daughter colonies — intact, with its industrial base undamaged.

Her eyes opened in wonder. Could it be, she asked herself, that

the Roosevelt Family was overextended? The Thousand Families prided themselves on their long-term view, investing early in new sectors, planets and industries to maintain their position, yet the Roosevelt Family had definitely been going well over the standard pattern. They'd even forced most of the other Families out of the sector, keeping it all to themselves… why? To make themselves even more immensely rich than they already were?

Or perhaps because it was their last desperate gamble, one last shot to avert disaster. The Empire's economy had been slowly freezing up for centuries, a result of the deadening effects of patronage and bureaucracy. If the Roosevelt Family was in serious trouble… who knew what might happen to the Empire as a whole? Families had come and gone before, yet the Roosevelt Family was colossal, with interests everywhere. Could it be that they were weaker than anyone dared think?

And, she asked herself, what would happen if the rebels kept destroying their investment?

They'd be able to carry on for some years, using their connections and the sheer unlikelihood of the situation to hide the truth, but eventually it would come out… and what would happen then? She thought about the hundreds of worlds that belonged, directly or indirectly, to the Roosevelt Family, with the trillions of humans and aliens inhabiting them. What would happen to those helpless lives? Or, for that matter, what would happen to the remainder of the Empire? Would the fall of one Family lead to the fall of others? Or would the remainder of the Families congratulate themselves on having avoided such a fate, pat the Roosevelt Family's head and buy up all their assets? Somehow, she doubted that the Families could work together to save the Empire. They'd be saving it from themselves.

"It is not a complete disaster," Brent-Cochrane said. His voice was calm, very composed, yet Penny could hear an underlying note of delight. Percival wouldn't survive the loss of his patrons, not with all the enemies he'd made over the years. "We do have new options, ones that we lacked before."

Percival glowered at him. "And what would those be?"

"We don't have to worry about preventing the news from spreading," Brent-Cochrane said. "So we contact the Sector Commander of Sector 99 — he's my Uncle, unless he's been promoted by now — and ask him to send reinforcements. Even a single additional squadron of superdreadnaughts would be a bonus for us… and he has three squadrons under his command. We ask him to deploy them here and we make further attacks prohibitively expensive for the rebels."

Percival's lips moved, but he said nothing. Penny could almost read his thoughts; calling in help, even from the nearest sector, would take time… and certainly reinforce the suggestion that Percival was grossly incompetent and also partly responsible for the mutiny. Coming to think of it, she wondered, what would happen if Sector 99's Sector Commander turned up and tried to take command? He might be able to dislodge Percival… and if he really was related to Brent-Cochrane, he might place Percival's subordinate in his place.

And yet, now the message blackout had been broken, the news *would* be spreading and failing to ask for help would certainly count against him. And, Penny suspected, Brent-Cochrane would send a message of his own to his uncle, if he hadn't already. Percival had to know that too, which meant that he was trapped. He had to ask for help and hope for the best. She could almost sense his frustration, boiling off him in waves. She hoped, with a burst of malice that was almost worthy of Percival himself, that it choked him.

"I will communicate with Sector 99," Percival said. She smiled inwardly at his desperation. The message was racing relentlessly towards Earth. Six months — no, less than six months now — and the Thousand Families would know just how badly Percival had bungled the rebellion. A year from now, Percival might receive orders telling him to travel to Earth to be executed, or maybe — if his connections came through — a simple relief from command. "I want you to find the rebels."

"We will return to our position and wait," Brent-Cochrane said. "The rebels will eventually fall into our lap."

"You will go," Percival said. "Captain Quick will remain with me. I have much to discuss with her."

Brent-Cochrane kept his opinion on that, if he had an opinion, to himself.

"Yes, sir," Penny said. Inwardly, she was singing. She could endure any amount of discomfort if it meant she got to watch as Percival received his just deserts. "I'll remain here."

Chapter Twenty-Six

"I presume," Colin said with deadly calm, "that you have some kind of explanation for this?"

The crewman in front of him, a man who would never have set foot in Officer Country at all back when the superdreadnaught had fought for the Empire, looked uncomfortable and nervous. He was standing between two burly Marines, shaking so badly that he could barely stand to attention. Colin studied him carefully, silently noting the unshaven face and rat-like eyes. The crewman didn't cut a very convincing — or reassuring — image.

But then, no one would have expected the fleet's commanding officer to deal with the matter personally. Colin had only intervened to make the point that such issues *would* be taken seriously.

"We noted the problem with the atmosphere scrubbers two weeks ago," Colin said, when the crewman said nothing. The Marines who had arrested him hadn't told him why he was under arrest, but Colin suspected that the crewman knew perfectly well why Colin had sent for him — either that or he was guilty of something else. "Crewman First Class Nix… why were they not replaced?"

Nix flushed. It wasn't traditional to spell out a crewman's full rank. It was almost inevitably the prelude to a chewing out, if not summary demotion. The lower decks maintained themselves through harsh discipline, overseen by the NCOs, and a shared belief that attracting the attention of the senior officers was a bad idea. Colin hoped that Nix understood how much trouble he was in; if not, Colin would feed him the problem step by step, and then inform the crewman of just how he was going to be punished.

He smiled, inwardly. If nothing else, it was incredibly rare for an Admiral to handle such matters. His mere involvement would be a stern message to the crew.

"My department was busy coping with the reloading of the missile tubes," Nix said, finally. His shaking hadn't improved. "We didn't have time to switch out the atmosphere scrubbers. Sir, My Lord, those scrubbers are good for at least another two months…"

His voice died away as Colin looked at him, feeling a sudden urge to draw his pistol and shoot Nix though the head. On the face of it, Nix was quite right; the superdreadnaught — indeed, all military starships — was over-engineered and could have lost half of the scrubbers without the crew finding it hard to breathe. But then, Nix's real offence hadn't been anything to do with not replacing a scrubber. His offence was far worse.

"You may be right," Colin said. Nix sagged against one of the

Marines. Only a complete idiot would have mistaken Colin's tone for forgiveness. "You may have been able to leave the scrubbers in place without causing an immediate problem. Now tell me… what else did you do?"

Nix flushed. "I did nothing else, My Lord," he protested. "It was the only shortcut…"

"I read your 666, Nix," Colin said, sharply. "Would you like to know, I wonder, just what it said?"

The Imperial Navy loved paperwork — indeed, Colin had sometimes thought that the fleet could probably have used its piles of paperwork to bombard anyone intending to attack the Empire. Everything had to be logged; the loss of even a single bullet had to be noted and, eventually, would provoke an inquiry from the bureaucracy. Everyone on a warship had their own set of paperwork to fill out, most of which Colin had gleefully abandoned once the rebellion had started, yet there were some pieces of paperwork that could not be rejected or converted into toilet paper.

A copy of Form 666 had, according to regulation, to be filled out to account for each and every replaced part on the starship. A supervising crewman — like Nix — was responsible for filling in the forms for his department, adding them to the database in the ship's computers and allowing his commanding officer to learn, with the touch of a button, the exact condition of his ship. Or maybe not; it was far from unknown for junior officers or crewmen to fill out fake 666 forms, knowing that the risk of detection was minimal. How many Captains would crawl through the tubes connecting one part of the ship to another, knowing that it would smudge their fancy uniforms? Colin had even heard rumours that entire superdreadnaught squadrons had been allowed to rust, while their commanders filled out fake forms verifying that they existed and pocketing the pay for the crew.

"I read your 666 very carefully," Colin said, when Nix declined to reply. "It told me that the atmosphere scrubbers in your section had been replaced on time, right when you were helping to manhandle missiles through the tubes and out into space. And then it told me that you and your crews replaced the scrubbers all the way back to the day we took these ships off Commodore Roosevelt. And yet, when I had the scrubber examined, it had clearly been in place longer than six months. No wonder those poor recruits complained about the smell!"

His nostrils twitched as he contemplated the issue. The scrubber had been installed in a tube connecting two compartments, one used to house crewmen and the other used to house recruits from the various asteroid colonies out past the Rim. The crewmen had ignored it — they were used to having their interests and concerns dismissed

by their superiors — but the recruits, all hailing from various asteroid colonies, had taken their concerns to the NCOs, who in turn had taken them to the engineers. The scrubber had been located and, when the engineers had seen it, they'd called Colin and handed the issue over to him.

There were times when a scrubber would break, even without being in place for far longer than regulations permitted. Even the finest ships in the Imperial Navy ended up with infestations of mice, rats or even cockroaches, who left their dead bodies on the scrubbers with alarming regularity. Colin wouldn't have been angry at Nix if a scrubber had failed in such a way, but Nix had done something incredibly stupid and dangerous. He had also done something that, in the Imperial Navy, could carry a death sentence.

"And then I checked the numbers," Colin said, watching Nix wilt under his gaze. "The number on your 666 documents didn't match the serial number on the scrubber. I checked with the database and the number on the scrubber, it seems, was assigned to one that should have been withdrawn over two years ago. And, needless to say, you didn't even have that number on your 666 forms at all!"

He controlled himself with an effort. "Nix, you are in violation of Imperial Navy Regulations," he stated, flatly. The formal charge could wait until Colin had a chance to do the paperwork. His lips twitched. He'd led his comrades into rebellion and he was still worrying about paperwork! "Do you wish to face Captain's Mast or the judgement of your fellow crewmates?"

Nix blanched, his face turning even paler. Colin — or an Imperial Navy Captain, seeing that Colin had effectively resigned from the service — could legally issue any punishment he liked on his ship, up to and including execution. And his crewmates wouldn't be any kinder. They would know that he'd put their lives in danger and wouldn't hesitate to issue harsh punishment. His life wouldn't be worth living until he quit — as if he could quit now — or someone managed to kill him and make it look like an accident. Yet, by long tradition, Captain's Mast was inviolate. If Colin didn't kill him, his crewmates wouldn't kill him either.

But then, Colin knew, tradition was increasingly worthless these days.

"I choose Captain's Mast," Nix said, finally. He lowered his gaze to the floor. "I will submit to your judgement."

You're going to regret that, Colin thought, coldly. "Very well," Colin said. "Crewman Nix, you are demoted to Crewman Fourth Class, with all the attendant reduction in pay and rights. Your work will be monitored by the NCOs who will not hesitate to administer punishment should you make additional… mistakes. In addition, you

will receive ten lashes in front of the crew tomorrow after First Quarter. Do you accept the punishment?"

Nix swallowed hard. Technically, he could try to refuse, but the thought was absurd. Colin had let him off lightly and they both knew it. "Yes, sir," he said. Lashing was rare in the Imperial Navy and almost always reserved for gross incompetence or misjudgement. "I will accept the punishment."

Colin looked up at the Marines. "Take him back to his sleeping quarters and have him organise his possessions," he ordered. "He is to be transferred to the Fourth Class quarters and assigned a bunk there until further notice."

"Yes, sir," the lead Marine said. Unlike Nix, his voice was brisk and focused. Marines normally served as police onboard warships, breaking up fights between the crew and maintaining discipline. If the reports were accurate, Percival had replaced the Marines on his ships with Blackshirts. Colin smiled at the thought. Percival could hardly have encouraged the rebels — and mutinous tendencies among his crews — more if he'd ordered them to gun down their own families. "Come along, you."

Colin watched as Nix was marched out of the compartment and then closed his eyes, cursing his luck. Nix was one of the crewmen who just sought to wander through life, uncaring about any higher cause, not even focused on possible promotion. It wasn't an uncommon type, yet Colin couldn't afford them on his ships. It wasn't as if he had the might of the Imperial Navy and Imperial Intelligence behind him. He might act like a Captain in the Imperial Navy, yet Nix could point out — quite rightly — that he'd walked away from the service and therefore had no command rights.

But then, Nix had never been taught to think. The Imperial Navy recruited its lower decks crewmen from poorer worlds, gave them a little rote training and sent them out to pick up the rest on the job. Nix knew nothing, Colin suspected, about how the starship he was serving on actually worked, perhaps not even why an air scrubber was so important. The NCOs worked overtime to keep the new recruits from killing themselves, knowing that they would be blamed if one of the newcomers accidentally blew up the ship. The senior officers, who had been through the Academy as cadets of rare promise (or so Colin had been told) rarely understood what happened below decks.

There were ships where a good cadre of NCOs and a caring commanding officer ensured that they were a joy to serve on… and ships that were hellish nightmares for young crewmen, or even junior officers. The lower decks were dominated by thuggish crewmen, who bullied recruits out of their pay, created stills for illegal consumption of alcohol and — often — far worse. Colin knew all about the abuse of

power practiced by Admiral Percival, Stacy Roosevelt and their twisted kin, but the lower decks could match their sadism, if not their sophistication. He wondered absently if Stacy Roosevelt had known about the powder keg under her feet, before realising that it was unlikely. She wouldn't have cared if she had.

Back when Colin had been promoted to Commander and serving as the XO of HMS *Shadow*, he had made it his business to understand and tame the lower decks. It was ironic, but his exile at Percival's hands had introduced him to a whole new side of the Imperial Navy, one he had never realised existed. And he'd won; he'd cleaned out the bullies and convinced the NCOs to support him. After the war, once the Empire had started to reform, Colin intended to ensure that the lower decks became safe places to work. The bullies could take a short trip out of the airlock in their underwear.

Shaking his head, he turned back to the report from Flag Captain Jeremy Damiani, who had been doing his own checks on the other side of the superdreadnaught. Colin knew that he had stepped on the man's toes mercilessly, but he knew that there wasn't any choice — and besides, he needed to be intimately familiar with the superdreadnaught. Damiani hadn't been allowed to clean out the problems on his own ship — Stacy Roosevelt had refused him permission to do anything of the sort, although Colin had no idea why — and he had been horrified by what he'd found. Colin had been more pragmatic, if only because he'd seen worse. There were starships in the Imperial Navy that were not, in truth, commanded by their Captains.

He placed the datapad aside and stared up at the tactical star chart glowing in front of him. On the way back from Piccadilly, they'd hit two smaller worlds, wiping out a pair of Imperial Navy facilities in one and looting the other, where Percival had created a small resupply base for his ships. Colin had wondered if it had been a trap — it was odd for Percival to show so much forethought — so he'd gone in carefully, only to loot the station and flicker out — as far as he could tell — without any pursuit. If someone drew the three points he'd attacked on a star chart, they'd see them running in a line towards the Rim, but *not* towards the parts of the Rim that were part of the Popular Front. It might waste some of Percival's time and resources.

Colin grinned to himself. As far as he could tell, Percival's only hope was that Colin would expose himself, allowing one or both of Percival's superdreadnaught squadrons the chance to intercept him and break his force. Percival was doubtless already trying to search the Rim for his base — or his supporting elements — but that would be a thankless task. The Rim and the Beyond was vast, with hundreds of hidden colonies; Percival would have some problems tracking down

and locating the right one. The prospect of betrayal was far more serious, but Colin had taken ample precautions. The vast majority of the Rim's citizens had no idea where he was based and Colin intended for it to stay that way.

And then there was the message. Hester had written the basic message, and then Colin and Daria had worked on it, refining their statement to the Empire. It had been calculated to inspire potential rebels all across the Empire, but at the same time to discourage futile uprisings. And, hopefully, it would give Percival heart failure. Colin suspected that news of the rebellion was *already* going to Earth, regardless of what Percival had ordered, yet… would they replace him with someone more competent? He shook his head. It didn't really matter. It would take just under six months for his message to get to Earth and another six months for any new orders to reach Percival. By then, Colin would either have defeated Percival or died in an expanding ball of radioactive plasma.

His intercom buzzed. "Sir, this is Private Willis," a voice said. "We have moved Nix to his new quarters."

"Thank you, Marine," Colin said. Nix would get a second chance, although one in which he would be supervised for the rest of a very short and uncomfortable career. Colin intended to beach him when he had the chance. "You can report back to your duty stations now."

Grinning, he turned back to his notes.

* * *

"And what," Neil demanded, "do you call that?"

He glared at the new recruits, who looked nervously back at him. They had no formal military training at all, not even the quick and dirty training given to the Blackshirts. What they did have was a willingness to fight and die for their homes, the colonies along the Rim. Some of them were experienced fighters, yet they had never been properly *trained*. The difference was only unimportant to someone who had never served and Neil had been a Marine for over thirty years.

"You are not taking part in a dance," he snapped, casting a jaundiced eye over the recruits. "This training is supposed to teach you how to be precise! You stand *straight* when at attention, do you understand? And when I tell you to about-face, I want to hear you cry out when your fucking tool gets caught in your pants!"

He shook his head as the recruits looked miserable. They'd signed up without truly understanding the machine they'd joined, the Marine Corps; not as it was, but as it would be. Neil rather thought that his

old Drill Sergeants would have approved, although they would probably be trying to kill him, if he ever saw them again.

"Fifty push-ups," he added. "Drop and give them to me now!"

He concealed a smile as the recruits dropped and started to do push-ups. They'd thought that doing fifty was bad, the first time around… and then he'd shown them that he could do over five hundred, while only using one hand. It had impressed them more than most of them had wanted to admit.

They weren't bad kids, he admitted, in the privacy of his own head. A little rough, a little unresponsive to discipline, but the Marine Corps had taken worse and converted them into the finest Marines in the Empire. Or even outside it. The Marine Corps had been his family, one that had been shamed when they had been ordered to carry out a massacre. He would redeem it, whatever it took.

He caught sight of a small skinny guy, struggling with the final push-ups. The young man had the heart, all right; the only question was if he'd last long enough to grow the body. Neil knew what the Marine Corps meant, even if the new recruits didn't; war. War meant fighting and fighting meant killing. And deaths, friendly deaths. The Empire liked to conserve its Marines, although the blackshirts were regarded as expendable, yet… there were always deaths. There were times that he wished he'd been killed in the moment of his greatest victory, when he'd taken the superdreadnaughts for the rebellion. And yet he had lived.

Neil looked out over the sweating backs of the young men and women and wondered, despite himself, which one would be the first to die.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Welcome to Sanctuary," Cordova announced, as they stepped off the shuttle and into a massive rocky hanger deck. Unlike visiting an Imperial Navy starship, or a private firm, there was no welcoming party to greet them. "What do you think of the place?"

Hannelore looked around her, but it was nothing special, not unlike the habitats she had visited and intended to create at Tyler's Star. There seemed to be no security, apart from a single flight controller, and nothing barring the way into the heart of the asteroid. She couldn't see any safety systems, but she found herself hoping desperately that they were there. A space habitat was not always a safe place to live.

She'd actually enjoyed the two weeks she'd spent on the *Random Numbers*. Cordova had been the perfect gentleman, encouraging her to talk about her own life and asking insightful questions about the High City on Earth, even some that suggested that he had some insider knowledge of the place. In return, he'd told her about the Popular Front, about hundreds of rebel and insurgent groups working together to force the Empire to reform, or destroy it. Despite herself, Hannelore had found herself horribly intrigued and fascinated. Could it be that the Empire could be reformed, rather than destroyed? She'd known, of course, just how badly the system was rigged. The Roosevelt Family might even have managed to take the whole Tyler's Star project off her hands and give it to one of their allies. She'd kept it as quiet as she could in hopes of avoiding their interest.

Cordova had explained, regretfully, that while she wasn't a prisoner in a standard sense, the rebels couldn't allow her to go home. The truth was that Hannelore didn't *want* to go home. If she went home now, she would be exposed as a failure, along with the whole Tyler's Star project. The Thousand Families wouldn't throw her into the gutter to die — there were standards, even for the lowest families — but they wouldn't allow her another chance to prove herself. She would be given a small stipend and expected to join the thousands of family members partying, drinking and drugging themselves to death. The only alternative would be to retreat into herself and mind everyone else's business, like Great Aunt Grace. The memory of the long-nosed elder woman, poking herself into everything, made her shudder. She was not going to wind up like that.

"It looks like an ordinary asteroid habitat," Hannelore said, as they passed through a small airlock and into a bustling crowd. She'd shopped at the great shops on Earth, yet there was something about the market in front of her that drew her attention. Great piles of

clothes competed with books and datachip stores, while some of the sellers were openly displaying weapons or other illegal supplies. She picked up one of the books and discovered, to her surprise, that it was written in a language she didn't recognise. The Empire had attempted to stamp out all languages apart from Imperial Standard, yet she supposed she shouldn't be surprised to discover another language — or thousands of them — thriving along the Rim. "Or maybe…"

She saw Cordova smile as it sank in. There was nothing *fake* about the market in front of her, none of the urgent need to be fashionable surrounding the High City's great shopping malls, or none of the fugitiveness that surrounded the shops for the lower classes. There was no *fear* in the air, no sense that the Imperial Tax Authority might descend on the shoppers to demand its cut of the proceeds, or that the Blackshirts might march into the compartment and arrest everyone just for being in the presence of subversive literature. The people living along the Rim or out in the Beyond might live in permanent fear, terrified that the Empire might one day discover them and send starships to capture or destroy their asteroids, but they didn't let it wear them down. The kind of grinding, ever-present fear she'd sensed on other worlds simply didn't exist here.

"Of course," Cordova said, when she finally managed to put it into words. "The people here are *free*! They can do what they like and if they don't like their companions, they are free to set up an asteroid habitat of their own and live apart from them. We have millions of different groups out here. Look!"

His long finger pointed towards a pair of short figures, moving from stall to stall. The two green aliens, almost child-like in their motions, seemed to be welcome on the asteroid, rather than being hissed at as they would be on most Imperial worlds. The Empire encouraged anti-alien feeling and racism, yet the Rim seemed to accept all comers. The two aliens, she noted through numb shock, were also doing the one thing that would guarantee them a death sentence back in the Empire. They were carrying weapons… and no one seemed to find that alarming.

She looked away, her gaze sweeping across the market. Now she knew to look for the signs, she could see that most of the people within view were also armed; indeed, she would have bet good money that the ones who appeared unarmed were actually carrying concealed weapons. They weren't carrying stunners either, but outright weapons, ranging from pistols to submachine guns and even plasma rifles. She'd been told that the Empire had a monopoly on plasma technology, but like so much else she'd been told about the Rim and its people, she was starting to realise that that was a lie. There was an entire vibrant *culture* hidden away among the uncharted

stars.

The sound of heavy footsteps and mechanical whirring announced the presence of a cyborg, striding through the compartment without concern. Hannelore felt sick as she saw how the metal implants had been worked into the man's flesh, yet he seemed alive and unconcerned — and no one else seemed concerned either. The crowds parted to allow him to pass and he strode on into the heart of the asteroid without a backwards glance. On an Imperial world, he would have been arrested for improper — if not illegal — use of physical implants. Such technology was reserved only for the ruling elite.

"My God," she breathed. Perhaps she wasn't free of prejudice after all. "What was that?"

"That, my dear, was one of the Geeks," Cordova announced. She wondered, suddenly, if he had arranged for them to encounter one of the cyborg-men. Or perhaps it had just been a lucky encounter. "If they had the freedom of the Empire, they would create great things, new technologies that might reshape the human race. But they don't — that man would be under automatic sentence of death if he set foot on an Imperial world…"

"I know," Hannelore said. She felt a sudden wave of… culture shock, she guessed. She was tempted to ask if they could return to the cruiser, yet she didn't want to miss anything. She felt almost like a child on her first visit to a resort world. "What else is there here?"

Cordova grinned and walked her through the massive asteroid. Sanctuary had started life as a seven-kilometre nickel-iron asteroid, one that had been mined extensively before the rebels had moved in and converted it into a base of operations. Indeed, because of its semi-public location, it served almost as a regional capital for the Rim, with starships and crews coming in to sell their wares and pick up additional supplies. Hannelore guessed that those starships included pirates, but Cordova explained that, out on the Rim, the difference between pirate and legitimate trader was blurred. If the pirates were selling goods the Rim desperately needed, very few people would ask questions.

"We don't allow slave traders here," he explained, as they walked past a storefront advertising — of all things — farming equipment. "That's not uncommon in parts of the Rim, but they're not allowed to come here. Other than that… if they can sell whatever they bring, they're welcome to come. It helps keep us all alive."

Hannelore nodded slowly, her mind spinning. The Thousand Families might have been like the asteroid's population, back before the First Interstellar War and their rise to supreme power. It almost made her heart ache for the days when simplicity and legality had been the order of the day, rather than the deeply corrupt edifice that

bore down on the entire galaxy. The First Emperor, the man who had built the Empire only to be disposed by his over-mighty subordinates, was probably turning in his grave. His lips twitched. No one knew, at least according to legend, what had happened to the man. Rumour had it that he was still out there somewhere, waiting for the call to action, the call to save the Empire. She shook her head. It was just a legend, of course, probably started by the people who had quietly murdered their former Emperor. There was no way to know for sure

"Most of your crew wanted to join us," Cordova said, as they entered a set of private quarters. Cordova, it seemed, maintained a residence on the asteroid, but the compartments were barren and dull. Hannelore understood. His real home was on his ship, surrounded by his loyal crew. "Where do you stand?"

Hannelore hesitated. As a loyal subject of the Empire — and as a scion of the Thousand Families — her duty was clear. She should denounce him to his face, demand transport back to Earth and refuse any further cooperation. That was absurd; Cordova would just laugh at her, no matter what she said. She was in no position to dictate terms, a lesson that one of her distant relatives on her mother's side had taught her. He'd been taken alive by pirates and demanded his release, only to have his face slashed badly before he'd been ransomed back to his family.

And then… what did she have to go home to? Nothing, but disgrace; she would spend the rest of her days as a lotus eater, nothing more. No hope of a future, no hope of rising high, no hope of using her intelligence to carve out a place for her. She would become a laughing stock, like so many others. The Thousand Families stood together against the outside world — that was a lesson they had learned a long time ago, during the rise of the Second Emperor — but they were merciless to failures from their own ranks.

"I do not know," she admitted, finally. Part of her was tempted to ask if she couldn't just disappear into the Beyond and try to forget where she came from. The rest was uncertain. "What do you want from me anyway?"

Cordova smiled. "I think that I have a friend who would like to meet you," he said. He held out a hand — in the formal style of the High City, much to her surprise — and pulled her to her feet. "Come on."

* * *

Hannelore had grown up in the High City, where the younger members of the Thousand Families had access to all kinds of cosmetic

surgery and body-sculpting technology. She had been surrounded by girls who changed their faces and bodies regularly to follow fashion — large breasts had been pushed out by small tight breasts, only to be replaced in their turn by medium breasts; albino skin had been supplemented by dark chocolate skin, then an unholy green skin that had their elders chattering in horror — and had grown used to physical beauty. The boys hadn't been much better. They'd spent weeks in the shops, having their muscles enhanced until they all looked as if they'd spent years building up their physical strength. Most of them hadn't known how to maintain their muscles and had ended up returning to the shops time and time again, just to have them rebuilt.

Hester Hyman was striking, mainly because she *chose* to wear her scars. Her face had been pretty once — even though it had probably had the hard-worn features that most commoners displayed — but now it was marred by scars, including one that looked as if it was going to spilt open at any time. Her hair, shading to white, was tied up in a severe bun; she wore nothing, but a simple combat mesh. Hannelore had wondered if it was a form of reverse vanity, before she realised just how many enemies Hester would have gunning for her. She seemed to be unarmed, but Hannelore suspected that she carried at least one weapon, perhaps more. And then she was surrounded by a set of hulking bodyguards…

"Welcome to our lair," Hester said. Her voice was deathly cold, the result — Hannelore realised suddenly — of torture at the hands of Imperial Intelligence. Hester's throat was scarred too, as if someone had tried to cut her throat and hadn't quite succeeded. It was all part of the effect and even though Hannelore was smart enough to realise it, she found herself impressed. Hester was the strongest woman she had ever met. "I trust that it meets with your approval?"

Hannelore didn't know what to say. "It's been interesting," she admitted, finally. She had never imagined that she would be making small talk with Hester Hyman, a woman who had a colossal price on her head. "I rather enjoyed it."

"Good," Hester said. The time for small talk was clearly over. "The Popular Front needs you. Would you be interested in joining us?"

Hannelore blinked. "You want me to join a rebellion against the Empire?"

"A project to reform the Empire," Hester said, her wintery voice admitting nothing else. "I have been speaking to your crew while you were being shown around our asteroid base. They were very complementary about you. They felt that you had definite promise. Our ally felt the same way."

Hannelore stared at her. "You had a rebel spy in my complex?"

“Something like that,” Hester said, vaguely. She waved a hand, indicating that there would be no further discussion about any intelligence agents. “The fact remains that you won respect from people who had no reason to respect you. We could find a place for you in the Popular Front.”

“Committing treason,” Hannelore said. It surprised her how little the concept bothered her. She had no reason to be loyal to anyone outside her own family… and really, her two families had regarded her as more of an unwanted nuisance than anything else. After all, she was a living reminder of a failed policy. “What would you want me to do?”

“We need someone to assist us in coordinating the industrial project,” Hester said, calmly. “You have experience in handling such matters. You would be working with several different factions, all of which suspect that the other factions intend to secretly screw them when they get the chance. And, if we fail to build a fleet that can stand up to the Empire, we will be destroyed when the Empire finally responds to us. We cannot count on Admiral Percival’s replacement sharing his same level of incompetence.”

She smiled, as if at a joke that wasn’t really funny. “I had to urge people not to try to assassinate him,” she added. “He serves us better where he is.”

Hannelore chuckled. She had only met Admiral Percival once and she hadn’t been impressed. “I see,” she said. “Why do you want me for the job?”

Surprisingly, the answer came from behind her. “Because we will need to break up the alliances that hold the Thousand Families together,” a woman’s voice said. “If we put a person from the Families in a high position, it sends a signal to the others that there is a possible compromise, that we won’t kill them all when we win.”

Hannelore turned. She hadn’t even sensed the woman behind her until she had started to speak. The woman was tall, with long red hair, a heart-shaped face and a smile that seemed to light up the room. She wore a standard shipsuit, one that clung to her body and exposed every curve. Behind her, there was a smaller oriental girl, with dark eyes that seemed to be focused on Hannelore’s face.

“This is Daria, the leader of the Freebooters League, and Mariko,” Cordova explained, calmly.

“You may have some time to decide,” Hester said. Her whispery voice drew Hannelore’s attention back to her. “Once you have made up your mind, you can inform the good Captain of your decision.”

“One question, them,” Hannelore asked. “What happens if I say no?”

“We have a small isolated colony world that we have been using

as a prison," Daria explained. "If you refuse, we'll leave you there until the war is won or lost. It is a great deal more civilised than a penal colony, but you won't be able to affect the war in any way."

Including betraying the rebel leadership to the Empire, Hannelore realised.

* * *

She thought about it as Cordova escorted her back to his quarters and explained that he'd had a second bed put in for her personally. Unlike many of the lads from the High City, he hadn't even tried to take her to bed. Hannelore wasn't sure if he was just being polite, or if he had no interest in her at all, or… she pushed that thought aside and considered the rebel offer. If she said yes, the Empire would condemn her as a traitor and her family would disinherit her…

And then there was the other question; were the rebels sincere when they offered her the post, or did they just want her to be window-dressing?

She looked over at Cordova, who was reading something on a datapad. Somehow, she found it hard to believe that he was lying to her, or perhaps she didn't *want* to believe it. It could be just Stockholm Syndrome kicking in…

Hannelore shrugged and made up her mind. She would take the rebel offer, assuming they were sincere. If not… well, she would be in a position to do something about it.

"Call your leader," she said, sitting up. "Tell her that I have decided to accept."

"Splendid," Cordova said, holding out a hand. "Welcome to the Popular Front."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"Do you trust her?"

Daria nodded, although her eyes were hard. "I think that she is about as trustworthy as any member of the Thousand Families ever gets," she said. Colin snorted. That wasn't a particularly strong recommendation. "On the other hand, we do have testimony from her former crew and they think quite highly of her. She's no Bleeding Heart" — the term for an aristocrat who set out to improve the lives of the poor, if they wanted it or not — "but she's definitely someone we can work with."

"We can also keep an eye on her," Anderson said, reluctantly. He'd been one of the strongest voices arguing against keeping Lady Hannelore Ellicott-Chatham anywhere near the rebel fleet or the Popular Front. "If she decides to do something stupid, we don't give her a second chance."

Colin nodded. "Agreed," he said. He looked up at Cordova, who was perched on a stool that allowed him to display his latest uniform to best advantage. Colin suspected that, if one of Imperial Intelligence's assassins managed to get into the room and opened fire, Cordova would be the first target. He had the most striking appearance. "And how do you feel about her?"

Cordova didn't look surprised at the question. "She has a great deal of potential," he said. "If she'd had the resources of the Roosevelt Family behind her, she would have gone far. And she reminds me a little of myself, someone who was always held back by law and custom. I thought that I would give her the opportunity to rebel."

Colin smiled. Unless he missed his guess, Cordova found Lady Hannelore — she would have to ditch the title if she wanted to join the Popular Front, at least in public — attractive. He supposed that he couldn't blame him, not when she *was* pretty and charmingly intelligent to boot, but it risked opening up a security breach. He didn't need Anderson to remind him of the time that Imperial Intelligence had used pillow talk between an officer and his mistress, who was working for Imperial Intelligence, to condemn him for aiding and abetting criminal acts against the Empire. The story had broken up relationships all over the fleet.

"We will see how she works out," he said. He looked over at Colonel Frandsen. "How are the first batches of new recruits working out?"

Frandsen considered. It wasn't usual for a Colonel to take part in training recruits — normally, even in the Marine Corps, they would rarely see anyone higher than a Captain until they had graduated —

but nothing had been usual since they had rebelled against the Empire. Besides, Frandsen had insisted on monitoring the training himself and Colin hadn't had the heart to refuse. They couldn't afford mistakes caused by inexperienced officers and Frandsen had two tours at the Marine Corps Training Centre under his belt.

"Well enough," he said, after a moment's thought. "They've definitely got the promise. We weeded out a handful of trouble-makers and people who simply couldn't follow instructions and the remainder are undergoing heavier training now. We're short of equipment for them, but we are working on obtaining equipment from elsewhere."

Daria smirked, rather like a cat. "It's astonishing what falls out of a freighter's closed hatches if you bribe the right person," she said. "We may not be able to offer Marine-grade armour, but we can certainly obtain Blackshirt-level armour."

"That will reduce our effectiveness to some degree," Frandsen warned. "The Blackshirt armour isn't configured to a specific user."

"We'll just have to live with it," Colin said, grimly. The Popular Front had a surprising amount of industrial capability, but it wasn't up to the task of delivering Marine-quality armour. The latest report from the Geeks had been that the Annual Fleet's supplies had been unloaded and were being put to work now, fuelling the rebellion. "That leaves the question of our new ships. Where do we stand with those?"

Salgak looked up, his implants whirring and clicking as he spoke. "The preliminary arsenal ships are projected as being completed in three weeks," he said. "We expect that there will be a short period of shakedown trials before the ships can be deployed as part of the fleet, but we will monitor the process closely and probably shave a few days off the working-up period for any later ships."

Colin smiled. The Geeks were talking as if they were working slowly, but he knew that they were working at an astonishingly high-speed. No Imperial Navy shipyard could match them, not now they had the supplies from the Annual Fleet to work with and whatever other resources Colin could throw at them. Given twenty years, they might build up a fleet that would outclass the entire Imperial Navy, but they didn't have twenty years. The Empire knew that they existed and, now, the news was spreading outside Sector 117.

He looked up at the holographic display, now reset to its default mode. The expanding circles suggested just how rapidly the message was moving through the Empire, towards Earth. In nine months, perhaps less, the entire Empire would know about the rebellion. The Thousand Families would react, certainly; they'd cut ships loose from Home Fleet and whatever other reserves they had on hand, sending

them to the sector to reinforce Admiral Percival and seek out the rebel bases. Time was not on their side.

"Good," Colin said. "Once we have a sufficient number of supporting ships on our side, we will move against Camelot and punch out Percival's fleet. Until then…"

He looked around the room. Between Cordova, Khursheda and himself, a number of Imperial worlds had been hit. Apart from Piccadilly, none of them had been particularly important or wealthy, but the mere act of hitting them would give them prominence in Percival's mind. He would be tempted to spread out his fleet in hopes of picking off one of Colin's raiding parties, reducing the forces he had on hand to cover the most important worlds. Colin had no way of knowing if he would give in to that temptation. He had most of the systems under covert observation, but it took time for word to get from one system to another, leaving the information hopelessly out of date when he received it.

The rebels hadn't had it all their own way either. Several of Cordova's ships had been picked off when they'd run into a squadron of Imperial Navy heavy cruisers, who had chased them until the raiders could power up their flicker drives and escape. One of Khursheda's cruisers had been destroyed by an Imperial Navy battlecruiser during a duel over a resource-rich system on the way back home from Camelot. If the war became a war of attrition, Colin knew, the Empire had far more ships and men to spend on such a process. His fleet would be ground away.

"We need to hit Greenland," he said, reluctantly. Greenland was actually another Roosevelt system, with similar levels of defences to the last world they'd hit — and, this time, they wouldn't allow a squadron of superdreadnaughts into firing range without ironclad proof of identity. His ships would have to duel with at least one fully-alert orbital battlestation and while his superdreadnaughts would have superior firepower, Colin knew that he was going to get hurt. "It's the only other target that will force Percival to disperse his forces still wider."

"Perhaps it is the logical target," Hester said, in her harsh voice, "but it is not the target we need to hit."

Colin looked up, surprised. When he'd allied himself with Hester and helped her to form the Popular Front, they had agreed that he — Colin — would have supreme authority over the military. There were no others along the Rim — with the possible exception of Cordova — who had his military training or experience, although he did have to admit that the Rim had thousands of ships and crews experienced in hit and run attacks. If there had been a major disaster, he would have expected some complaints over how he ran the military, but they'd

won every major battle so far.

"We have links with Jackson's Folly," Hester pointed out. Colin frowned, somehow unsurprised. He'd carefully refrained from looking at any of the data collected by his observation ships in the system — apart from using it to track the Imperial Navy starships — hoping to avoid a sense of guilt, a sense that everything that Jackson's Folly was enduring was because of him. He knew better, he'd read Stacy's files… yet he couldn't help the guilt. It was not logical, but it was true — and very human. "They're suffering down there."

Colin frowned, feeling the guilt clawing at his heart. Perhaps Hester saw it in him, because she chose to push harder. "The Blackshirts are destroying every hope and dream the planet ever had," she said. Colin understood, suddenly, how Jackson's Folly had gotten its hands on some of the Empire's technology. They'd had links with the Rim! "We need to help them or there won't be anything left when we finally defeat the Empire and liberate their worlds."

"That may be tricky," Colin admitted. He had nothing against helping Jackson's Folly, but it would be a dangerous operation, all the more so because the Empire might have left one of Percival's superdreadnaught squadrons in the system. An equal fight was all very well, but Colin would have preferred to cheat. Besides, if his superdreadnaughts were lost, the Empire would have won. "Let's see."

He tapped his console and brought up the latest from Jackson's Folly. The timestamp under the display warned that the latest reports had been a week old by the time they'd been transferred to the asteroid and then inserted into the superdreadnaught's datanet. Colin mentally edited that to nine days, as they'd spent two days refitting the ships, repairing minor damage and giving the crew a few hours of liberty on the asteroid.

The enemy superdreadnaughts were gone, but Jackson's Folly was enveloped by over thirty starships, including two battlecruiser squadrons. The other ships were either monitors — positioned in low orbit to provide fire support to the troops on the ground — or destroyers, prowling the system for enemy starships. The latest reports suggested that Jackson's Folly had a number of ships hidden in the asteroid belt, which emerged from time to time to pick off vulnerable Imperial Navy starships. The world had done a good job of preparing an insurgency to greet the Imperial Navy and the Blackshirts, but Hester was right. Without some outside help, the Follies were doomed. Stacy Roosevelt and her twisted kin would wind up inheriting a desert, a desert called peace.

"We could hit the orbiting ships," Hester said. "It would buy the Follies some time to regroup before the Imperial Navy returns to the system to chase us out."

“And what happens then?” Colin asked, seriously. “The Follies will just suffer worse…”

He broke off as a thought occurred to him. Stacy Roosevelt wasn’t foolish enough to gainsay orders from her Family, not now, not when she would be completely dependent on them. Her family had ordered her to take the world intact, which meant that she couldn’t order the world scorched. And, without her permission, Percival would never dare to order a scorching on his own. It would utterly destroy his career. An officer with a stronger connection to the ideal of the Imperial Navy might order the scorching anyway, destroying a threat to the Empire along with his career, but Percival didn’t have that sort of moral courage. Colin’s lips twitched. *Immoral* courage would probably be a better term for it.

“We hit; get in, get out and then give them the time they need to regroup,” he said, slowly. He didn’t want to get sucked into a maelstrom. “We cannot make a long commitment to Jackson’s Folly, not when it would pin us to one world.”

“We could do more,” Khursheda pointed out. “We could enter orbit and drop KEWs on any Blackshirt positions. We could destroy most of the occupation force. The Empire would have to fall back until they could round up more Blackshirts to replace the ones we killed…”

“And then they would have to pin down a squadron of their own superdreadnaughts to prevent us from doing it again,” Cordova added. “Or perhaps they would abandon the invasion until they got reinforcements.”

“There will still be a quite considerable workforce of trained workers — workers trained in starship construction and maintenance — on the surface,” Salgak said, in his mechanical voice. Colin smiled inwardly. Even the Geeks liked the idea! Or, at least, were willing to come up with ideas to justify the plan. “We could offer to take them with us to our own construction yards and use them to expand our own workforce. It would improve our own capabilities and help to eventually liberate their worlds.”

Colin kept his face expressionless as he thought. He couldn’t deny that they had a point, that Jackson’s Folly did need help — and that it would provide an opportunity for a cheap victory against the Empire. The downside was that it would force the Empire to rush in reinforcements and rule the planet with a harsher hand, regardless of anything resembling common decency. Or, perhaps, he might be wrong and Stacy Roosevelt would permit Percival to scorch the world and settle for merely occupying the daughter colonies.

He didn’t want to be responsible for mass slaughter. He’d worked hard to avoid leaving any signs that Jackson’s Folly was in any way responsible for his mutiny and rebellion. And yet, the Empire had

invaded anyway. What was the use of the rebellion, the value of the Popular Front, if they failed to respond to a world that needed help? Colin knew that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of worlds needed help, yet he could do nothing to help them. Jackson's Folly, on the other hand, could be helped…

"Very well," he said. Besides, a smart commander knew not to go against the advice of all of his subordinates, at least not very often. "We will recon the system first, and then jump in and open fire. We won't stay in the system for longer than a day at most. Commodore Ismoilzoda?"

"Yes, sir," Khursheda said.

"You will prepare a fleet of fast personnel transports, ones that can carry as many people as possible, equipped with a fleet of shuttles," Colin ordered. "I want those ships to accompany us to Jackson's Folly. We will use them to take out as many trained workers and their families as are willing to go and can be stuffed into the ships. Don't hesitate to push the life support to the limit. They won't want to go without their families."

"Yes, sir," Khursheda said. "How soon do you want the ships?"

"As soon as possible," Colin said. At least Jackson's Folly was some distance from Camelot. They should be able to get in and out quite nicely without any warning reaching Percival, at least until it was far too late. "And then we will assemble the fleet and liberate the system, if only for a few weeks."

* * *

By its very nature, Sanctuary Asteroid played host to inhabitants and guests from all over the Beyond. The coordinates had been spread so widely that far too many people knew about its location, including Imperial Intelligence. The spooks hadn't bothered to pass the information on to the Imperial Navy, knowing that destroying a single asteroid wouldn't do more than scatter the inhabitants and destroy whatever links it had to the rest of the Beyond. Far better, they had reasoned, to use the asteroid as a base for their own operations, ferreting out the far more interesting — and dangerous — colonies deeper into the Beyond.

The spy felt a sense of relief as she finally returned to the asteroid. Sanctuary hadn't been used as the meeting place for the Popular Front, even though it was fairly public, and the spy had been nervous about her presence. If someone had thought to ask the right questions, or check her luggage before she left, it might have aroused suspicions. The Rim couldn't afford anything reassembling due

process; if they'd been suspicious, they would have put her out the airlock first and ask questions later. But Sanctuary was far more cosmopolitan and crowded; the spy could afford to get lost in the crowd. In her official capacity, as a senior officer for one of the rebel outfits, he went into a single shop and requested a private meeting. The shop, a cover business for Imperial Intelligence, honoured his request. There was a brief exchange of signs and countersigns and then the spy got to work.

"This is the headquarters of the Popular Front," she said, passing over the datachip. She'd secured the data and encrypted it using a new encryption system, one directly from Imperial Intelligence. It should be impossible for anyone to decrypt it without the right code, although the Geeks would probably be able to do it if they had a reason to look. "I suggest you pass the information onwards."

The shop's owner — a man with thirty years of experience in Imperial Intelligence — nodded. "Of course," he said, in agreement. He made the chip vanish with the ease of long practice. "We cannot charter a ship for it specifically, but there should be another ship coming in soon and they can take the information onwards."

The spy nodded. The rebel group she worked for would have been horrified to discover that most of their supplies came directly from Imperial Intelligence. They would have been even more horrified when they realised that Imperial Intelligence could have destroyed them at any time. The spy sometimes wished that things were different, but Imperial Intelligence had done something to her head, back when he'd been inserted into the Rim. She could not be disloyal. Even the mere thought of disloyalty was painful. Obedience was all that she could do.

And even if something happened to her, afterwards, the information would reach the Empire.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"Captain, the *Bombardment* is reporting that it is running short of KEW projectiles," the communications officer reported. "They are requesting permission to reload from the *Fabricator*."

Captain-Commodore Angelika McDonald sighed. It was rare to need more than a handful of KEWs on any given world; indeed, most worlds, even the ones with memories of independence in living memory, didn't risk putting up a serious fight. The Empire sometimes ran out of patience with rebellious worlds and scorched them down to bedrock, before dropping terraforming packages onto the remains of the worlds and shipping in new colonists. Jackson's Folly, on the other hand, seemed to be populated by madmen and women; they just kept fighting, even though their cause was hopeless. The Blackshirts had gone to war with their drug-fuelled barbarity and rage… and were losing. If they hadn't been able to call in fire support from orbit, they would have been destroyed by now and in this war no one took prisoners.

Jackson's Folly had plenty of time to prepare for the Empire and even through their overt preparations had failed the covert preparations were working far too well. *Fabricator* was the third manufacturing ship to operate within the system's asteroid belt, melting down asteroids and converting them into KEW projectiles. The last two had been lost to treacherous tricks by the defenders, methods of war — her lips twitched in amusement — that were not included in tactical handbooks. If she lost that ship, her supply of KEWs would be cut off until a new manufacturing ship arrived in the system; she had requested a replacement in advance, but Admiral Percival — it seemed — was refusing to deploy any additional ships out to the system. He didn't understand the problems she was facing.

She spun her chair around until she could see the live feed from the Blackshirt command garrison, down on the surface. General Branford was holding forth, decreeing the mass slaughter of civilian hostages and the use of lethal chemical weapons, before urging his troops upwards and onwards for the glory of the Empire. Branford the Butcher, some called him, although never in his hearing; a man who had broken an alien race to the Empire's will. His supporters, and there were many, had never concealed the fact that he'd done it by slaughtering three-fourths of the alien race and demonstrating his willingness to complete the task and adding a third exterminated race to humanity's reputation. Angelika wondered, despite herself, if Branford hadn't been given secret orders to exterminate the planet's population, without making it obvious just what he was doing. He was

certainly killing enough of them in reprisal raids. Even his fellow Blackshirts, drug-addled through they might be, had started to question his tactics. Her lips twisted into a droll smile. Branford might end up being the only person dismissed from the Blackshirts for excessive violence. The joke, never spoken where a senior officer might hear, was that that was how a person got *in*.

"Order them to pull out of orbit and head to *Fabricator*," she ordered, reluctantly. She had only five monitors at her disposal, all spaced around the world to provide complete coverage, and pulling one of them out of orbit — if only for a few hours — would put a crimp in her ability to provide fire support. Her warships carried KEWs, of course, and she would redeploy a group of heavy cruisers to provide additional support, yet they couldn't deploy as many as the monitors. Intensive use would mean shooting them dry. "Assign a destroyer group to escort them through the flicker and back."

"Aye, Captain," the communications officer said. Angelika nodded. The young man might have had good connections — explaining why he was serving on a starship's bridge just after graduating from the Academy — but he was also fairly competent and she could trust him to deal with it. His birth was actually an advantage in dealing with officers who outranked him by several orders of magnitude, although he hadn't realised that — or that he could go much further. "The 44th Destroyer Flotilla is ready to escort the monitor."

"Good," Angelika said, returning her gaze to the main display. Jackson's Folly was, at least on the surface, a fairly typical system, but it contained nasty traps for the Empire. There were a handful of raiding starships out there — including one that had destroyed one of her other manufacturing ships — and hundreds of hidden bases scattered through the asteroids. Her mining crews sometimes discovered enemy spacers waiting to kill them, or stumbled over abandoned installations, installations that didn't seem to be listed on any file they'd captured on the planet. The natives had clearly wiped all of the data, if they'd had it in the first place. "Once that is done, schedule me a conference call with the senior officers. I want to discuss matters with them."

"Aye, Captain," the young man said. He was too young to recognise a symbol of… maybe not entirely defeat, but certainly an admittance that things were not going according to plan. Normally, Angelika would have played host to the senior officers on her flagship — the battlecruiser *Violence* — but now she didn't dare take a commanding officer away from his or her ship. The insurgents were proving far more effective than anyone had dared fear. No one was quite sure what had happened to the light cruiser *Rainbow*, yet the

insurgents had been boasting over their success over the planetary datanet, despite every attempt to shut it down. It wasn't more advanced than the Empire's system — indeed, it was genuinely inferior — but it had been designed as a distributed system, rather than the centralised systems used by Imperial worlds.

Angelika leaned back in her command chair, rubbing her eyes and silently cursing Admiral Percival under her breath. The superdreadnaughts had intimidated the locals, all right; they'd overshadowed anything the rebels and insurgents could do to them. And yet… the Admiral had seen fit to withdraw the superdreadnaughts, judging that the smaller ships could handle the pacification of the system without the presence of their older cousins. Angelika had a nasty suspicion that she'd been set up to fail. Perhaps Admiral Percival, whose drunken advances she had refused one night, had deliberately planned to embarrass her in front of the Roosevelt Family. Or perhaps it was worse. Stacy Roosevelt, the silly girl who had somehow managed to lose nine intact superdreadnaughts to a mutiny, might have been looking for someone to distract attention from her failure.

She'd expected the conquest to be easy, until she'd run her eye down the list of prohibited targets. No one had ever heard of such a thing, not in the Empire; the whole reason for developing the monitors in the first place was to make it clear that there was nowhere to hide from the Empire's wrath. And yet, she had a whole list of places that she couldn't drop a KEW, or she'd spend the rest of her life on an isolated asteroid settlement or mining colony. It made little sense to her, for what was the point of using monitors if there were safe areas, areas where the insurgents and rebels could congregate and plot their war against the Empire.

At least it isn't my ass on the line, she thought sourly. The insurgents didn't seem to have realised that there were areas off-limits for KEWs, thankfully. If they had, the Blackshirts occupying those areas would be facing far more determined attacks. As it was, the factories, universities and industrial development complexes were safely in the Empire's hands, although no one knew how long that would last. She lifted her eyes to the master plot and scowled. The orbiting industrials were also off-limits, even if the rebels retook them and started to use them to produce new weapons of war. She had been told, quite firmly, that she was only authorised to deploy Blackshirts to recover them.

"Captain, the conference call is scheduled for 1450," the communications officer said. Angelika nodded; forty minutes from local time, just long enough for her to have a shower and a change, hopefully allowing her to appear less stressed. She'd trained her

subordinate captains to make the best use of their battlecruisers — and, in doing so, had probably encouraged them to think of ways to unseat her. She wouldn't be too surprised to discover that one or more of them had sent secret — and accurate — reports to their patrons, rather than the pap Public Information was putting out about a highly-successful campaign. The bastards were creating an illusion that, unless someone came up with a brilliant new tactics, could only rebound on the Empire.

"Good," she said, again. She stood up and looked over at her XO. "You have the bridge."

"I have the bridge," the XO responded, already heading over to the command chair.

Angelika took a moment to check the ship's status before heading for the hatch and out into Officer Country, barely managing to conceal the yawn that threatened to burst out and overwhelm her. The Blackshirt on duty outside her cabin snapped to attention, one hand almost cracking against his helmet, but she ignored him. The Blackshirts had been making themselves unpopular since they'd been brought onboard to replace the Marines, yet they'd been behaving themselves since she'd introduced one of them to the joys of breathing hard vacuum. No one raped one of her crew and got away with it.

She took a look at her bed, wondering if she could get away with thirty minutes of sleep, but she shook her head. She was too tired to risk it, not when she had to speak to her subordinates. Being late for that would certainly cause some of them to wonder if she was going soft. Shaking her head, she undid her tunic and headed over to the shower, knowing that her steward would pick up the dirty uniform and put it in the wash. The warm water felt heavenly after so long on the bridge. She swallowed another yawn and tried to put Jackson's Folly out of her mind.

* * *

"I think they're serious about keeping this system," Markus said, as the freighter advanced into the inner system. The freighter-gunboat combination seemed to work, so Admiral Walker had ordered them to do it again, only in a far more dangerous system. Markus didn't really care about the danger; even the Imperial Navy would hesitate before firing on an obviously harmless freighter, at least one thousands of kilometres from the planet's surface. "Take a look at that!"

The Geeks had modified both freighters, but they'd had a great deal more time to work on the *Sidonie* and it showed. They'd rigged a sensor suite that was far better than anything the Imperial Navy had

deployed to its starships, even the recon cruisers that were used to plot out targets before the Imperial Navy flickered in and destroyed them. The Survey Service itself didn't have such excellent gear. Even operating on passive mode, the sensors were still sucking in awesome amounts of data and filing it into the gunboat's secure storage module.

Jackson's Folly was not just occupied; the Empire was already attempting to exploit it. Starships hung in orbit around the world itself, striking regularly down at the surface, while others prowled the asteroid belts. The cloudscoops at the gas giant were ringed by a squadron of destroyers while freighters were unloading orbital weapons platforms, as if they feared an attack. Markus wasn't sure if they knew or suspected that the rebels were on their way — he had no time for the Popular Front nonsense — but it hardly mattered. All that mattered was that the last reports had been out of date. There were over sixty starships in the system, which suggested that whoever was in command had screamed for additional help and actually received it.

"I've found their manufacturing craft," Carola reported, from where she was going through the data. The Geeks had programmed in the best analysis algorithms that Markus had ever seen, but in the absence of true AI it was impossible to rely completely upon them. "There's only one of them, unless there's another on the far side of the system."

"Could be," Markus agreed. The *Sidonie* had deployed massive and stealthy sensor platforms, allowing it to soak up data at an astonishing rate. An active manufacturing ship wasn't easy to hide. The Empire might have intended to hide an additional ship in the system, but that would — naturally — limit its utility. "Or maybe the reports are true and the locals scored some spectacular successes."

The hour ticked by slowly as more information flowed into the gunboat's systems. The deployment patterns of Imperial Navy starships, the use of freighters and heavy convoy escorts even over small distances, the regular use of KEWs against planetary targets… even transmissions, broadcast using standard encryption protocols. The Imperial Navy had realised that the mutiny meant that the mutineers — and the Popular Front — had access to their coding systems, but the Blackshirts hadn't made the same deduction, or perhaps they just didn't care. Markus watched some of their transmissions, signals showing burned out buildings, local inhabitants hanging from the nearest tree and shuddered. No one wanted to fall into the hands of the Blackshirts. He shut the signals off in disgust. The intelligence crew would want to look at them — and the propaganda department would want to use them to illustrate the horror of the Empire — but *he* didn't want to look at them again. It was just another reminder that, before the mutiny, he had been

fighting for a monstrous regime. He would never wipe away the shame, or cleanse his hands of blood.

It would have been nice to make contact with the locals and promise support, maybe collect some information from them, but they'd been specifically ordered not to attempt anything of the sort. The Imperial Navy didn't seem to be paying attention to a damaged bulk freighter that was limping towards Jackson's Folly — perhaps assuming that they could deal with her long before she reached the planet — yet that could change, if the Imperial Navy felt that it had a reason to look. The stealthed platforms and probes they'd launched, if they were detected, would mark the *Sidonie* out as an espionage ship. His lips twitched. Besides, there was no hope — as far as the enemy knew — of escape. The bulk freighter design took hours to power up its flicker drive.

Ninety-nine percent of combat operations, he'd been told when he'd started to train at the Academy, was nothing, but solid boredom. The life of a gunboat crew was normally anything but… yet now, he was bored. It was, by any standard, the most successful recon mission of his life… and yet, it wasn't exciting. He hadn't jumped into the system and weaved a random evasive course while using his sensors to plot out targets, leaving enemy pursuit in the dust when he triggered his flicker drive and jumped out again. Markus looked over at Carola and smiled to himself. They'd known that when they qualified as a gunboat crew — and as husband and wife — that they might die together. It had been considered better than one of them living to mourn the other.

"The monitor is flickering back to the world," Carola said, suddenly. They'd noted the arrival of a monitor in the asteroid belt, something that had puzzled him until they'd realised that it was visiting the fabrication ship for resupply. How many KEWs had they dropped? He'd never heard of a monitor shooting itself dry before, even during the most intensive combat operations. And there were no less than six monitors — perhaps more — in orbit around Jackson's Folly. How much fighting was there on the planetary surface?

The thought made him wince. The human race had largely abandoned armies since it had climbed into space, for no organised army could survive when the enemy controlled the high orbitals. The First Interstellar War had been fought out in space, with worlds bombarded with everything from asteroids to radioactive bombs and biological weapons. Even the Blackshirts were more of an occupation force than a real army, while the Marines were a precision unit. Just how bad was it down on the surface? He shook his head. The Blackshirts, he knew, deserved little sympathy. They deserved death, or worse.

“I think we’ve pushed our luck far enough,” he said, finally. The *Sidonie* was on the verge of crossing the security line surrounding the planet. The Imperial Navy would definitely send a ship to investigate their arrival now. “Shall we go?”

The Geeks had also redesigned the interior of the freighter, reasoning that they might be able to prevent the gravity compression caused by the flicker drive from destroying the ship. Markus settled down in his chair, checked that Carola was ready, and then powered up the drive. A moment later, they were gone from the system, leaving a mystery behind for the Imperial Navy. It wouldn’t puzzle them for long.

* * *

From three light years away, Jackson’s Folly was completely indistinguishable from any other star, just another steady pinprick of light shining out in the darkness. The sight left Colin feeling oddly homesick, even though he had never been back home since he’d taken the oath at the Academy. He still remembered the child within who had gazed up on the stars and wanted to be out there among them.

His wristcom buzzed. “Sir, we have a full download from the gunboat,” his Flag Captain said. “The targeting patterns have not changed significantly, but there are some additional targets in the system. I request permission to deploy the battlecruisers to go after their manufacturing ship.”

“Granted,” Colin said. He smiled as a thought struck him. “Tell them to try to take it intact if possible.”

He took one last look at the stars and turned, heading out of the observation blister. “I’m on my way,” he said. “Order the fleet to begin jump preparation. It’s time to go to war.”

Chapter Thirty

"So I have sent to Camelot for additional support," Angelika concluded. The conference had only been going on for ten minutes and she was already sick of it. Imperial Navy regulations insisted on all squadron commanders holding a conference with their subordinates regularly, yet she much preferred social gatherings on her flagship. At least they could have shared a meal as well as a long chat. "I'm sure that Admiral Percival will see the justice of our cause."

There were some hastily-hidden smiles. No one seriously expected Admiral Percival to be motivated by anything resembling justice. It was more likely that he would consider how each possible decision would affect his own career before making up his mind. Angelika would have condemned that, but then… every Imperial Navy officer would probably make the same calculation. She probably would too, if she ever reached such rarefied heights. It was such a long way to fall.

"Until then, we will continue to support the troops on the ground and patrol the asteroids, hoping to locate their hidden bases," she said. "I think that…"

She looked up in alarm as the GQ alert echoed though her ship. "All hands to battle stations," her XO said. "Set condition one throughout the ship. Captain to the bridge; I say again, Captain to the bridge."

Angelika scowled. She had chosen to hold the conference in her cabin as it allowed her to chance to be more relaxed and informal. She should have known better, she told herself as she broke the link and grabbed for her jacket, pulling it on and following it with the white hat that signified supreme command. The wags in the fleet called it the Worry Hat. The bastards, in her opinion, were quite right. She checked her appearance quickly and walked swiftly — not running, the ship's commander could not be seen running — onto the bridge.

"I have the bridge," she said, as the hatch hissed closed behind her. No one saluted or stood to attention, something that was not permitted during battle stations. "XO; report."

"We have multiple hostile starships flickering into the system," her XO reported. Angelika took the command chair and studied the main display. The glowing red icons representing nine superdreadnaughts — and a handful of supporting ships — were positioned in front of her. For a moment, she wondered if Brent-Cochrane had been permitted to return to Jackson's Folly, but the IFF signals didn't match. She was looking at the rebel superdreadnaughts. "I confirm nine superdreadnaughts, nineteen cruisers of varying design and four ships of unidentified purpose."

Angelika pulled the data up on her personal terminal and frowned. The rebel superdreadnaughts were the ones Commander Walker had successfully hijacked, but the battle computers couldn't put a name to the other ships. That suggested that they were from the Rim or the Beyond, where the Imperial Navy had lost quite a few smaller ships to mutiny — or perhaps they had simply been sold off by corrupt Imperial Navy contractors. She had urged Admiral Percival to hold a full investigation into the contractors within the system, but nothing had come of it, probably because the contractors were closely linked to the Roosevelt Family and it would only cause embarrassment. Or, perhaps, the Admiral himself was stealing the ships and selling them off. The irony made her smile. Admiral Percival was actually less corrupt than some of the other officers nearer the Core Worlds.

She shook her head. Whatever the origin of the smaller ships, the superdreadnaughts alone were more than powerful enough to destroy her command, which meant… standing still and waiting to be hit probably wasn't a good idea.

"General signal to all ships," she ordered. Her tone, she hoped, would discourage anyone from questioning her too closely. "I want every warship in orbit to form up around the flag. The monitors are to be dispatched at once to the waypoint" — her hands danced across her terminal, designating a set of coordinates — "I have selected, where they are to wait for further orders. If I do not issue orders within the week, they are to make their way back to Camelot and report to Admiral Percival."

She saw another icon blinking on her display — General Branford wanted to talk to her — and ignored it. There was nothing she could do for him and his men now. The simplest tactic would be to power up the flicker drive and jump out, but it went against the grain to leave without taking a bite out of the enemy first. Of course, the enemy had bigger weapons and might take a much bigger bite out of her… she pushed that thought aside and waited for her orders to spread through the command network. There was too much to be done.

And to think I was bored and stressed, she thought, mockingly.

"Communications; transmit directly to the *Petunia* and the *Dudley*," she ordered. "They are to separate from their squadrons and fly directly to Camelot, where they are to report to Admiral Percival and recommend that he dispatches a superdreadnaught squadron to reclaim this system." She scowled. Her enemies would probably accuse her of defeatism, but then her enemies weren't looking at nine superdreadnaughts with blood in their eyes. "Inform me when they have flickered out."

The enemy superdreadnaughts were still bearing down on her with ponderous inevitability, but her small fleet was already forming up around the *Violence*. She called up the tactical display and ran through several different options. There was no way they could actually hope to win — which, in some ways, simplified the tactical situation enormously — but perhaps they could bluff. And who knew; maybe the horse would learn to sing.

"The fleet is to follow the designated course," she ordered, as the command datanet tightened up. Her hands danced over the panel, drawing out a course that would allow them to fly away from the planet in normal space, while also allowing her to take a few long-range shots at the incoming ships. It was lucky, she told herself, that she'd insisted on deploying and maintaining the external racks, even though her crew had grumbled endlessly about it. "Any starships within the outer system — most particularly *Fabricator* — are to head out of the system and rendezvous at the first waypoint."

She scowled. There was no way to mask her actions as anything other than a retreat. The freighters and the manufacturing ship would require time to power up their flicker drives, far longer than a warship or even commercial fast transport. If she held out long enough before flickering out, she might manage to keep the rebels concentrated on her, rather than hunting down targets that couldn't run. And who knew — perhaps there was a superdreadnaught squadron within range that could come to her rescue.

The two fleets and their projected courses appeared in front of her. If she was right — if the enemy commander didn't have a plan of his own — they would have around thirty minutes of long-range missile fire before she had to flicker out, perhaps less. It wasn't enough, but it would have to do.

"Signal to General Branford," she ordered. "My intentions are to fight a running battle before leaving the system. You are urged to safeguard your positions and hold out. The Navy will be back."

* * *

Colin watched the enemy fleet's deployments with something akin to awe. If Percival had been so badly outmatched, he would have set a new speed record fleeing the system, without bothering to consider the multiple ways he could delay and even harm the advancing rebel juggernaut. The enemy commander present in the system, however, was brave and shrewd enough to realise that if they held out, they might successfully damage his fleet before they left the system.

“Impressive,” he mused. The enemy fleet’s monitors were already rising out of the planet’s gravity shadow. If he’d risked jumping in closer, he might have been able to intercept them, but then… that risked scattering his fleet. Besides, monitors were the one class of starship that Percival wasn’t actually short of; destroying five or six of them wouldn’t crimp him for long. “And it puts the ball in my hands.”

He tossed different ideas around in his head. If the monitors had remained in orbit, he would have ignored the remaining Imperial Navy starships and gone for them, but instead there was no point in charging at the planet. It wasn’t going anywhere. The enemy commander was tempting him with a chance to destroy nearly sixty starships, or perhaps force them to surrender and add them to his fleet. And it wasn’t a opportunity he could refuse, not only for the chance to weaken Percival, but also for the possibility of removing a dangerously-smart enemy commander from the playing field. The commander, whoever he or she was, had pulled him into a neat little trap.

“Alter course to intercept,” he ordered. The battlecruisers and other smaller ships that made up the Imperial Navy’s occupation squadron had one advantage over his ships; they could simply outrun his ships, even in normal space. The sublight drive fields that provided propulsion might have the same top speed for all craft, but the superdreadnaughts, with their far greater mass, had a far lower rate of acceleration. The enemy missiles would have a far shorter flight time than his own missiles — his missiles would be chasing an enemy, while his ships would be flying *towards* the enemy missiles — which gave them another advantage. But then, he told himself, if it became evident that they meant to keep the range open, he would simply break off the chase. “Prepare to open fire.”

He keyed his switch. “Commodore Ismoilzoda, you are cleared to break off and perform your own mission,” he added. “Good luck.”

* * *

“They took the bait, Captain,” the helmsman said. “They’re coming after us.”

Angelika smiled, dryly. The helmsman was young, the youngest person on the bridge. He wasn’t old enough to realise that nine superdreadnaughts in hot pursuit wasn’t actually a good thing… well, it was at the moment, but it wouldn’t remain that way. Given time, the range would stabilise and then the superdreadnaught’s superior firepower would begin to tell. And then her ships would have to flicker out or die.

"Good," she said, concealing her own thoughts. Every Imperial Navy officer had to come to terms with his or her own mortality, yet they were also used to carrying the biggest stick in the known universe. A battlecruiser should have been secure against anything pirates or rebels could throw at it, but instead *Violence* felt fragile with nine superdreadnaughts bearing down on her. Angelika wondered, absently, if she had remembered to update her will. It seemed so silly to worry about mundane things when the enemy ships were about to attack.

She looked up at the tactical display. Unless the rebels had somehow developed long-range missiles with additional speed, their firing range would be identical to hers, which meant that when the red circle marking powered missile range touched the enemy ships, they could open fire on her. Or would they wait and allow the range to fall a little more? What was the enemy commander thinking?

"Bring up the point defence and prepare to engage enemy missiles," Angelika said, calmly. There was no point in panic, even though the red circle was sliding ever closer to the enemy ships. "Lock weapons on the lead superdreadnaught and prepare to engage."

"Weapons locked on target, Captain," the tactical officer said. Angelika could hear the quaver in his voice, but he was carrying out his duty. "We are ready to engage."

"Place the damage control parties on full alert," Angelika added. Her XO nodded. There was no way that the squadron was going to escape without damage. "And prepare…"

The red circle slowly touched the icons representing the enemy ships.

"Fire," she ordered. "Full spread!"

* * *

"The enemy ships have opened fire," the tactical officer reported. Colin nodded. The enemy ships had fully-loaded external racks and they had launched nearly a thousand missiles towards his ships. They seemed to be focusing in on one target, the *General Grant*. The commander of the lead superdreadnaught had requested the position as a reward for excellent performance on the gunnery drills. Part of Colin's mind wondered if he was so pleased with his performance now. "I am breaking down the formation now…"

"Activate our point defence datanet and prepare to engage," Colin ordered. The tactical system had been constantly updating itself in preparation for the engagement. Now, with the threat developing in front of them, they could at last take action. "Prepare to fire."

He was tempted to fire back at once, but that would have merely exposed his missiles to a longer flight time than strictly necessary. He watched the timer, noting that it would take the enemy missiles nearly four minutes to reach his ships, adding a curious sense of slow motion to the combat. At three minutes, he would open fire, avoiding the danger of a lucky hit wrecking one or all of his external racks. Nuclear warheads didn't detonate if they were hit, unlike some other warheads, but it would still pose a serious risk.

The timer ticked relentlessly down as the swarm of enemy missiles approached. Despite his calm appearance, Colin was nervous, for it was their first engagement against a genuinely prepared foe. The Annual Fleet had barely had seconds to fire back. The penal world had never fired and surrendered at once. The defenders of Piccadilly had been taken by surprise. Here… the enemy had as long as they could possibly need to prepare their weapons. The effects were right in front of him. The enemy missiles seemed to be one great harmonious mass. Sorting out the real missiles from the decoys would take time… time they didn't have.

"Tactical," he said, as the timer ticked down to zero. "You may fire at will."

The superdreadnaught lurched as it unloaded its first massive salvo, leaving Colin to sit back in his command chair and watch as the enemy missiles flew into a maelstrom of fire. The problem with external racks — and with the arsenal ship concept — was that they were only one-shot weapons. An external rack blocked the inner missile tubes, meaning that it had to be used and destroyed before the enemy targeted the superdreadnaught, perhaps blocking the ship's missile tubes and rendering it partly defenceless. It gave the ships a hell of an opening salvo, but once they were fired, the superdreadnaught's throw weight fell sharply.

General Grant shuddered badly as several missiles slammed home, but the point defence network held true, preventing most of the missiles from getting through. The superdreadnaught suffered minor damage. Colin checked with the ship's captain and was relieved to discover that damage control teams were already on the way. One advantage the Rim-dweller had over most of the Imperial Navy crewmen was that they knew more about the technology than merely the basics, or how to replace it. Given time, the Rim would become a far stronger threat than the Empire had ever dared fear.

He settled back in his chair and watched as the superdreadnaughts launched their second salvo towards the retreating starships.

* * *

"All hands, brace for impact; I say again, all hands…"

Violence rocked sharply as two missiles crashed home against her rear shields, powerful energies breaking through the shields to lick and tear at the starship's hull. Her point defence weapons rotated and added their own fire to the datanet trying to cover the retreating fleet, but the sheer volume of fire the superdreadnaughts could throw was breaking the network down by main force. Angelika smiled, darkly, as her ship shook again. The rebels were cheating.

"Captain, *Fantastic* and *Glorious Godley* have been destroyed," the coordination officer reported, through a coughing fit. The air on the bridge was starting to smoke as power surges ran through the ship, caused by overloading shield generators. "*Vigilante* has lost main drives and is stranded. The rebels will take her intact."

"Not without a working drive," Angelika snapped. The battlecruiser shook again, new red lights flaring up on the display. They had been exchanging fire for just over ten minutes and her fleet was being battered to pieces. Two of the smaller rebel cruisers had been destroyed and one of the superdreadnaughts was limping, suggesting that she had knocked out one of its drive nodes, but it was a poor exchange rate. It was far more likely that the rebels would simply destroy the crippled battlecruiser, unless they could find a tug to savage her and transport her back to their base. "Refocus the defence network and…"

Her ship rocked, violently. "Rear shields are down, Captain," the tactical officer warned. Angelika swore under her breath. Without the rear shields, the enemy missiles could literally shoot through the hole and slam into the hull. The cadets at the Academy had a rude term for that, but somehow it seemed less funny now. "Our rear point defence array is offline and…"

"Bring up the flicker drive," Angelika ordered. She'd risked overstressing the drive, knowing that when they needed to leave, they wouldn't have time to power up the drive. "All ships are to jump out to the first waypoint on my command…"

She took one last look at the enemy superdreadnaughts, making their ponderous advance, and scowled. She hated to lose, even against vastly superior firepower. "Jump us out," she ordered. "Now!"

The flicker drive engaged and they vanished from the Jackson's Folly system.

* * *

"The enemy ships have jumped out," the tactical officer reported. "They're gone."

Colin nodded. He wasn't too surprised. "Secure from General Quarters," he ordered. The damage report scrolled up in front of him. Apart from *General Grant*, which had lost two drive nodes, none of the superdreadnaughts were badly damaged. "Take us back to the planet at maximum speed."

"Aye, sir," the tactical officer said.

Chapter Thirty-One

Lightning flickered into the system, already moving at considerable speed. Khursheda heard the sound of retching behind her as the shock hit some of her crew — the drugs to counter flicker-shock were not always effective — and gave them what privacy she could by refusing to look at them. The secondary bridge crew would take over if any of her bridge crew were to be rendered ineffective by the shock.

"Jump complete, Commodore," the helmsman said. "We have emerged at the targeted coordinates."

Khursheda nodded. They'd planned their jump carefully, avoiding any large masses with their own gravitational field. Even now, centuries after it was developed, the flicker drive wasn't understood perfectly, but the human race did know that large gravity masses interfered with precision. The small squadron had flickered from the main body of the fleet to its target, a handful of detected sources within the Jackson's Folly asteroid belt.

"Sensors are picking up enemy ships," the tactical officer said. "I confirm the presence of four destroyers and one manufacturing ship. The IFF signal identifies it as *Fabricator*."

"Good hunting," Khursheda said. She studied her display for a long moment, before looking up at the communications officer. There was no way that *Fabricator* could power up its drive and escape, but the destroyers could run any time they liked… if they abandoned the single most valuable ship in the system. "Demand their surrender."

"Aye, Commodore," the communications officer said. The dark-skinned woman worked her console for a few seconds. "They are not responding."

"Lock weapons on target and go to active scans," Khursheda ordered. The display sharpened as powerful sensors began probing space, hunting for targets. The manufacturing ship, twice the size of a superdreadnaught, was very clear on the display. The smaller destroyers, moving to cover the larger ship, were tiny. They couldn't even stand up to one battlecruiser, let alone four of them. "Repeat our surrender demand. Remind them that we will take them alive and treat them decently if they surrender."

There was a long pause. Khursheda found herself hoping that Admiral Walker was right, that others would wish to join the rebellion or perhaps to stand on the sidelines, without choosing a side. She knew that most of the Observation Squadron had joined the rebellion, as had the superdreadnaught crews, but Admiral Percival had time to prepare for a second round of mutinies. Placing Blackshirts on the various crews was absurd, at least from an efficiency point of view,

but it would make any further mutinies impossible. Perhaps the reason why the manufacturing ship wasn't surrendering was that there was a team of Blackshirts onboard, forbidding surrender by force of arms.

"They're responding," the communications officer said. As one, the four destroyers flickered out, vanishing somewhere in the vastness of interstellar space. Khursheda checked the readings from the sensors, but they were insufficient to determine where the destroyers might have gone. Somewhere within fifteen light years was the best the computers could do. The Imperial Navy's researchers had promised that the ability to refine such projections was within reach, but no one, not even the Geeks, had cracked the underlying problem. "They're offering to surrender in exchange for amnesty."

Khursheda exchanged a puzzled glance with her XO. Why would they want Amnesty? It took her a second to realise that the crew of the manufacturing ship clearly feared that they would be blamed for whatever was going on down on Jackson's Folly, or perhaps handed over to the locals for punishment. Admiral Walker would have done neither, Khursheda was sure. If he could resist the temptation to kill Stacy Roosevelt, he could probably resist the temptation to hurt men who had done nothing to him personally.

"Tell them that as long as they unlock the computers and refrain from causing any damage, we will leave them unharmed," she promised. Perhaps the crew would be willing to join the rebellion. She keyed her console, linking her directly to the Marine shuttles waiting in the shuttlebay. "Major, you are cleared to launch; good luck."

The display updated as the two shuttles raced away from her ship. Once the Marines were onboard and the manufacturing ship was secure, they'd take it to the first waypoint and wait for Admiral Walker and the other ships. The captured ship would be taken directly to the Geeks, where it would be used to produce additional material to supply the rebellion. The crew, if they refused to join the rebellion, would be transferred to the uncharted colony and left there until the war was over. Her lips twitched in sour amusement. The rebels, if they went on at such a rate, would end up building up a larger prison world than the Empire.

"The Marines have secured the ship," the communications officer reported. "They're warning that it will be at least another hour before the ship can flicker out."

"We can wait," Khursheda said. If there did happen to be an Imperial Navy superdreadnaught squadron within range, they would have to abandon their conquest and flicker out… or maybe not. "Tell them to move the ship to this location" — her hand danced over the console, designating a position several light seconds away — "and

power down everything, but the essentials."

"Aye, Commodore," the communications officer said.

Khursheda sat back in her command chair. The Imperial Navy might return to the system before she could depart, but in that case she would literally hide the manufacturing ship right under their nose. She checked the timer and smiled. Now… all they had to do was wait for the time to leave.

* * *

"We're coming up on the planet now," the helmsman said. Jackson's Folly loomed ahead of them on the display, a lovely green-blue world surrounded by red icons. Colin's probes and sensor teams had been struggling to sort out the Imperial-held space facilities from friendly — or at least harmless — facilities, but it was a nightmarish struggle. There was far too much debris in orbit.

"Dispatch Marine teams to the orbital manufacturing facilities," Colin ordered. According to the intelligence they'd picked up, the facilities the locals had built — the facilities Stacy Roosevelt had been so eager to capture intact — were currently occupied by the Blackshirts, who supervised the workers while holding their families hostage. Even so, it wasn't a safe place to be a Blackshirt; the locals were alarmingly good at trapping and killing the invaders. It helped that the Blackshirts were neither trained nor equipped to operate in orbit. "Prepare to isolate targets on the ground."

The Blackshirt commander — General Branford, according to intelligence — had been smart, smart enough to shut down his advanced tracking systems and try to hide. Colin's own sensors could track some movement on the planet's surface, but it was hard to distinguish between enemy movement and friendly activity. His communications officers were attempting to listen to communications from the planet's surface, yet they were finding it hard to pull out anything useful from the babble. Only a handful of Blackshirt signallers were still transmitting, marking their locations as targets for KEW strikes.

Colin scowled. In some ways, it was the single most dangerous part of the operation. His superdreadnaughts — the only ships with large supplies of KEW projectiles to drop — were going to be operating close to the planet, so close that they would be trapped within its gravity shadow. If an enemy fleet happened to arrive, Colin would find himself trapped against the planet, forced to punch his way out rather than simply flickering to safety. And if that enemy fleet happened to consist of superdreadnaughts… Colin liked to think that

the Popular Front could go on without him, but it wasn't certain. Nothing was truly certain in life. He'd been living on borrowed time since he'd launched a mutiny against the Empire.

He smiled, pushing the dark thoughts aside. "Inform the Marines that they are cleared for launch," he added. Whatever happened, he knew that his people would give their all. "They may engage the enemy at will."

* * *

Colonel Neil Frandsen hooked into the assault shuttle's sensors as it launched from the Marine transport, the pilot already gunning it down towards the planetary surface. Neil allowed himself a moment to enjoy the sight of a lovely world before he started to check up on the other shuttles. One had developed a drive fault and was being held back — a problem that occurred more frequently than the Marines liked to admit — but the remaining ninety were already spinning through space.

"Prepare to flicker," he ordered. The shuttles were so small that they could flicker — with reasonable accuracy — far closer to the planet than any capital ship. Unlike the penal world, where there had been no counter-fire to speak of, Jackson's Folly was occupied by the Blackshirts, who knew that they could expect no mercy from the locals. "On my mark… *flicker*!"

The shuttle seemed to go black for a terrifying second, then it was suddenly buffeted by the atmosphere as it materialised in the air. The craft lurched suddenly, dropping several feet before the drive systems caught on and powered it through the air, leaving him feeling delighted. They'd survived the jump! He linked back into the Marine combat network and noted the absence of two shuttles, both having vanished during the jump. If they were lucky, their drives had failed or they'd reappeared somewhere else. If they were unlucky, they had materialised *within* the planet and had been killed before they'd had any time to realise that something had gone wrong.

"I am picking up enemy sensors," the pilot reported. Through his mental link, Neil could see them as red bands of light sweeping through the sky. As he had hoped — when he had sold Admiral Walker on the plan — their sudden appearance had alarmed the Blackshirts. "They are attempting to lock onto us."

"Good," Neil said. He laughed, knowing that non-Marines would consider him insane. "Go to evasive manoeuvres and call in strikes from high overhead."

"Don't teach your grandma to suck eggs," the pilot countered. The

gee-forces increased as the shuttle started to slip into evasive manoeuvres. The small formation was coming up on Freedom, the city that had served as the capital of Jackson's Folly. It looked like a war zone now, even from the shuttles. "Time to ejection is two minutes and counting."

Neil grinned. This, the chance to make a forced landing on a hostile planet, was what he lived for. It was what war was all about, something that the Imperial Navy would never understand. And as for the Blackshirts… his grin widened. Killing them never got old.

* * *

"Sir, we have incoming enemy shuttles," the operator reported.

General Branford cursed. He had hoped that digging into Freedom — the absurdly-named city — would provide a degree of protection from orbital strikes. His men had trapped most of the city's population in with them, using them as shields against both insurgents and rebels. As far as he could tell, there had been no link between Jackson's Folly and the mutineers, but now one was definitely forming. Besides, Public Information had to get some things right, if only by accident.

"Order them to open fire as soon as the enemy enters range," he ordered, coldly. The enemy commander had to be a Marine. No one else would be insane enough to flicker into the atmosphere, just to mount a raid. It had to be a raid. If the rebels had the firepower to defeat the Imperial Navy, they'd be off trashing Camelot or even Earth, rather than liberating Jackson's Folly. No, it was a raid. "And then order the forces on the ground to disperse."

He clenched his fist in outrage. As a loyal servant of the Empire, he knew his duty; he had to bring Jackson's Folly into the Empire, whatever it took. It hadn't been a peaceful deployment. The locals were armed to the teeth and reluctant to bend the knee to the Empire, forcing him to deploy his forces and strike back at rebels and insurgents. The bastards wore no uniforms and fought without honour. They were to blame for the massive death toll. Branford took no pleasure in slaughtering hostages, or in exterminating traitors, yet there was no choice. The insurgents had made it so.

"The enemy shuttles are entering range," the operator said. Branford nodded. Some of his encampments had been struck from orbit, but others had been spared, spared because of the human shields gathered around them. "The defences are opening fire… now!"

* * *

“They’re opening fire,” the pilot said. “Prepare for ejection.”

Neil braced himself as his suit was picked up and thrown down through the hatch, out into the open air. The sky was filling with green flashes of light as plasma cannons attempted to smash the shuttles out of the sky, yet they were already too late. The men and women of his Marine Regiment were already deploying. The enemy were clearly reacting too late to prevent it. A handful of shuttles vanished in fireballs — others launched missiles back towards their tormentors, hoping to knock them out before more shuttles died — but the remainder kept going, turning away from the enemy base. Neil barely had a second to see the ground coming up towards him before he landed, feeling the jerk even through the compensator field enveloping his armoured combat suit.

He fell into the Marine command network at once, deploying his suit’s weapons and looking for targets. A group of Blackshirts were already running towards them, trying to deploy, when they were scythed down by the Marines. Moving as one, their training coming to the fore, the Marines attacked savagely, heading directly towards the Blackshirt base. The Blackshirts, instead of using armoured suits, preferred to use armoured vehicles. It was a mistake, Neil knew, one he intended to exploit. The plasma cannons his Marines carried could punch through anything the Blackshirts had on hand.

The fighting grew more savage as they raced through the city, as if they were all of one mind. The locals, at least, had the sense to stay out of the way, although fragments of chatter his suit picked up suggested that some of them were taking the opportunity to attack the Blackshirts and score a little payback for the suffering and torment they’d undergone. Neil was right in the heart of it, fighting alongside his men and feeling a little bit of himself die when a Marine fell. The Blackshirts had broken out their heavy plasma cannons, powerful enough to burn through a Marine armoured suit, firing almost at random. The cannons didn’t survive long when the Marines saw them, hitting them with their own weapons and causing them to explode with colossal force, but it hardly mattered. A handful of Marines were killed before they could react. Neil saw a running Blackshirt, his body ablaze with white fire, and felt sick. The Blackshirt had been too close to one of the plasma cannons when the containment field had exploded. He snapped off a mercy shot and put the poor bastard out of his misery.

“Onwards,” he snapped. The fighting had become kinetic, with the Marines responding to threats as they appeared, but they kept pushing towards the main base. The Blackshirts had taken over the city’s governmental buildings and converted them into their headquarters. The level of defences around them looked oddly

paranoid, but then the locals had been very good at slipping explosive devices and even armed men through the gaps. He wondered, absently, why the Blackshirts had bothered to place their headquarters there, yet it hardly mattered. Perhaps they'd seen it as a way to mark their claim on the local real estate.

The fighting became a blurred series of impressions as they assaulted the main base. They tore through barriers intended to keep out vehicles, running right into the Blackshirts and their final stand. Neil realised that they were using their drug injectors, rendering themselves largely immune to pain and fear. Marines didn't use the drugs, largely because they affected the brain as well, turning the Blackshirts into soulless killing machines with little sense of right or wrong. He saw a Blackshirt run right at them, firing madly, and cut him down. Others resisted the temptation to seek self-immolation and held out until the Marines cut through them, like a knife through butter. The final defences were destroyed and the Marines pushed onwards, into the building. Neil checked the map he'd downloaded and installed in his HUD and smiled. If he knew the General's reputation, he would be in the main office, the one that had belonged to the planet's President.

General Branford lifted a pistol as the Marines burst into the office, but he wasn't hopped up on battle drugs and Neil knocked it from his hand before he could do anything. The General looked… as if he didn't want to surrender, yet didn't want to go on fighting anyway. There was something cold and hard in his gaze, as if he thought he could get out of anything. Neil looked at him and felt sick. The ordinary Blackshirt was drugged, to the point where he could never be justly held accountable for his actions, but the General… the General had known all along what he was doing. When Neil had faced such a choice, he had refused; the General… had carried out his orders.

Neil reached out with one armoured hand, ignoring the General's protests, and crushed his head like a grape. It felt as if he was cleansing the Empire, crushing all that was rotten and unwholesome within it… and it *was* personal. Branford had carried out the orders Neil had refused to obey.

"It's over," he said, with a sigh. Without their leader, the remaining Blackshirts would be unable to coordinate any resistance. The locals could deal with them, at least until reinforcements arrived from Camelot. By then, the rebels would have quit the system. "We've won."

Chapter Thirty-Two

"I wish I could say that this was rare," Hester said, in her whispery voice. She had insisted on accompanying the fleet, despite Colin's objections. "I wish I could say that Jackson's Folly was the only world to suffer in such a manner."

Colin nodded, hiding his own shame. He hadn't understood until it had almost been too late. If Percival had given him the rewards and patronage he'd wanted, that he'd earned, he would never have allowed himself to see the festering corpse the Empire had become. His petulance — there was no other word to describe it — had opened his eyes to the truth, and yet… even then, he had never allowed himself to see the full horror of the Empire.

Jackson's Folly had a population of six billion souls, scattered over the system; its daughter colonies, between them, had another ten billion. Under the Empire's iron heel, at least a billion had died, either through the bombardment, the fighting, hostage executions, starvation or plain outright sadism. The Blackshirts had crushed resistance as harshly as they could, yet it had continued, flaring up whenever they thought that an area was pacified and the forces there could be moved elsewhere — at which point they discovered that the region was not pacified at all. They had prescribed horrible punishments, for everything from owning a weapon to giving Blackshirts dirty glances, but still the insurgency had continued. Perhaps they would have won in the end, with a commander willing to permit the most barbaric acts against the insurgents and those who sheltered them, yet most of the planet would be shattered. The industries that Stacy Roosevelt had wanted so desperately would be destroyed in the crossfire.

It added a certain kind of piquancy to Colin's dilemma. If he destroyed the industries before he withdrew from the system, he would also destroy the only thing standing between Jackson's Folly and a scorching. Yet, if he left the industries in place, they would be used against him and the other rebels. He had wrestled with the issue for several hours before deciding that he couldn't countenance destroying the industries, not if the price was opening the way for a scorching. Jackson's Folly had suffered enough.

"Yes," he said, finally. "I understand."

Hester gave him a sharp look, but said nothing… or perhaps she understood better than she cared to let on. Her own homeworld had been treated in a comparable fashion, after she had founded and led a rebellion against the occupying troops; God alone knew what had happened to most of her friends and family. She'd survived when so many others had died, spared by the whim of fate. No wonder she was

feeling guilt. Looking down at Jackson's Folly was like looking down into the past.

Colin looked up as the hatch opened, allowing a pale-faced man to stumble into the starship's interior. Speaker Brenner Java was the last surviving member of Jackson's Folly's Government, the only one to evade the Blackshirts as they swept for political leaders and men who might breed dissent. Jackson's Folly had hidden most of its leaders, but the Blackshirts were very good at extracting information from unwilling donors. Java had only survived because he'd been paranoid; legally, he was the First Speaker, at least until new elections could be held.

"Welcome aboard," Colin said. Java stared at him, almost as if he didn't quite believe that Colin was real. "We need to chat."

Java's eyes fixed on Hester. "You," he said. "Why are you even here?"

Colin concealed a smile as he led the way into the conference room. He'd ordered some food for the fugitive Speaker and anyone he brought with him, although Java had insisted on coming alone. Colin guessed that he'd designated others to succeed him if he died, just to ensure some degree of continuity. The security scans had picked up some items of uncertain purpose on the man's body, suggesting that he had also come prepared to kill himself if necessary.

"We came to win you some time to regroup," Hester said, as they took their seats. "The Blackshirts can be removed from your world, but they will be back…"

"God damn you," Java burst out. Colin reached for the weapon he wore on his belt before realising that Java was confining his outburst to shouting. "Do you know what they will do to us when they come back?"

"They won't scorch your world," Hester said, calmly. Colin nodded, but said nothing. He understood Java's point of view. They couldn't build a flicker drive powerful enough to move the entire planet away from the Empire. "We decided to attempt to win you time to regroup."

Java glared at her, but nodded reluctantly. "Very well," he said, sharply. "What do you want?"

"The Empire intends to make use of your trained manpower," Hester said. "We want to take them out of reach, into the Beyond, along with their families. I think that that will make it easier for us, in the long run, to defeat the Empire."

Colin listened as Hester outlined the Popular Front and what they hoped to achieve. He wasn't too surprised to learn that Java hadn't heard of the Popular Front. Jackson's Folly wasn't part of the ICN and wouldn't be until it was properly subdued, which would take years at

this rate. Java sounded interested, but he was also unwilling to commit himself or his world. Colin couldn't blame him. The Empire would be furious when it learned about the rebellion and any world with known coordinates that could be blamed for the crisis would be scorched. Even Jackson's Folly's immunity wouldn't last forever.

"I see," Java said, finally. "And you cannot uplift the entire population?"

"I'm afraid not," Colin said. Earth, with its orbital towers and rulers determined to exile as much of the population as possible, was still a teeming mass of humanity. Even the entire Imperial Navy would have been unable to transport billions of humans from one star system to another. Evacuating an entire planet was well beyond the capabilities of the Popular Front. "We can take those who can help us liberate the Empire and, eventually, free your world."

Java turned his gaze on Colin. Despite himself, Colin almost flinched, realising that that man had seen terrible things. Like Hester, he had been permanently scarred by his experiences, even if the scars were invisible. Colin felt a flash of guilt. Even during the exile Percival had forced on him, he had lived comfortably, if not well.

"I do not believe that that is possible," Java said, finally. "We fight on because there is nothing to live for, no hope of freedom or even life under the Empire."

"Then help us," Colin said, searching for the words that would touch the man. "Help us help you. We can work to liberate the entire Empire from their rule."

"Perhaps you can," Java said. "We'll trade. You can take those who want to go and their families. In exchange, we want the remaining Blackshirts and their weapons."

"We brought along weapons to transfer to you," Hester said, quietly. "And as for the remaining Blackshirts… you can do what you like with them. We need their transports for your people."

Colin nodded, keeping his face under careful control. The locals hadn't waited for any permission to descend on the Blackshirts, who, trapped without orders from superior authority, had fought back savagely. Blood had run through the streets on Jackson's Folly, yet without support from high orbit, they had been doomed. There were only a handful of survivors, for the bases that had been isolated from the civilian population had simply been picked off from orbit. Colin's Marines had taken their transports with the intention of using them to add additional lift to take people off the planet.

"And I wish your rebellion luck," Java added. "I do not feel that we should offer you any overt support. The reports on the planet will say that you kidnapped the workers and their families. I hope that you understand."

"We do," Hester said. "And if you want a place with us…"

"Maybe after my planet is free," Java said, angrily. "I will not desert my post."

Colin watched him leave, escorted back to the shuttle for transport back down to the surface. "Poor bastard," he said, finally. "I wish we could do more for him."

Hester smiled, creating a striking effect on her scarred face. "There is nothing we can do until the Empire is defeated," she said. "His attitude is quite commendable."

* * *

"Move along, calmly," Neil ordered. "Don't push or run; there are enough spaces for everyone."

The line of refugees didn't look calm, although they were at least resisting the temptation to run. The workers had known that their families were being held hostage for their good behaviour, yet they hadn't known — or had chosen not to believe — just how badly their families were being treated. Neil had watched, through his armour, as husbands were reunited with wives and children, many of who were scarred or worse. Not all of the families had been happy to leave either. Some were scared of the Empire; others were scared of the unknown. The Blackshirts had told them, often enough, what the insurgents would do to them if they were captured. The fact that the insurgents were more likely to welcome the freed hostages than kill them seemed to have escaped their notice.

Or perhaps it was deliberate, Neil thought, trying to distract himself from the sight of a man and woman holding each other tightly, crying their eyes out. They hadn't chosen to be separated; they'd missed each other dreadfully when they'd been apart. Their lives had been twisted and broken by the Empire… he looked away, towards a line of kids, and shuddered. The bastards who had casually hurt the children would suffer before they died. The Blackshirts didn't understand the concept of restraint either.

Each of the Blackshirt transports carried nearly twenty thousand stasis tubes, each one capable of holding a grown adult or perhaps two children in suspension. They would be transported to the Beyond and decanted at one of the Geek-run facilities, once living quarters had been prepared for them. The other transports, the ones rounded up by the Freebooters League, had smaller compartments, but Neil was privately hopeful that they'd be able to lift out over two million workers and their families. It helped that the Blackshirts had done the hard work of rounding up most of their families and transporting them

to orbit, saving time. Other families had declined the offer and scattered into the wilderness, hoping to remain undetected. Perhaps they'd make it if the rebellion succeeded, but if not… Neil felt a moment of pity. The Blackshirts would show no mercy if they caught up with the families.

He watched a pair of lovers walk into the compartment, share a final kiss and then climb into the tubes. A flickering curtain of blue light appeared, holding them suspended like flies in amber. They would be released — no time would have passed for them — when they reached their new home, where they would be welcomed and encouraged to work against the Empire. Some of the children were scared, despite everything their parents could say, and medical staff moved in with sedatives. They'd wake up after the transport had reached its destination.

"Quiet down," he snapped towards a pair of men, who were pushing at others. One of them had been badly scarred by a neural whip, but that didn't make it acceptable, not when there were women and children ahead of them. Neil knew that cold logic ordained that the trained workers had to go first, yet he'd chosen to ignore those imperatives and ensure that the children were suspended first. He doubted that Admiral Walker would object. "There is room enough for everyone."

It took several hours to load up the transport, but Neil welcomed it, not least because it didn't give him any time to brood. By the time the last of the refugees was loaded onboard, the Marines were tired, with their tempers beginning to fray. Neil sent some of them to their bunks, ordering them to get a good long rest before they went back on duty, yet he kept himself awake. There was just too much to do. He led the remaining Marines back onboard the shuttle and detached from the transport, leaving the prize crew to start the task of taking it into the Beyond. Neil was watching as it vanished in a flash of light, flickering away towards the first waypoint.

He yawned, despite himself, as another transport started to move over towards the orbital station. Some of the transports hadn't come empty. Various rebel groups had been building armies and had insisted on deploying them to Jackson's Folly, intent on having a go at the Empire's finest. Neil had told them — as had Admiral Walker — that it was futile, but they had insisted. They'd wanted their own crack at the Empire and, eventually, the rebel leadership had given in.

Neil frowned as the shuttle docked with the new transport, allowing him to take command and supervise the loading. Could it be, he wondered, that Admiral Walker and his allies had decided that some of the rebel groups were expendable? There were certainly hundreds of groups that were effectively worthless, intent on throwing

themselves into the Empire's gaping maw. Had Admiral Walker decided to allow them to seek a glorious death, knowing that they would be killed? It would be unusually cynical for Admiral Walker, but Neil could easily see Hester Hyman or Daria considering such an action necessary.

And if the groups were willing — no, begging — to go face death…

He pushed the thought out of his mind as he strode into the transport. Time was ticking away and no one knew how long it would be before the Empire returned to Jackson's Folly. They might well have less time than they thought.

* * *

Colin paced the command deck as the final set of transports completed loading up. He'd been surprised to discover — although perhaps he shouldn't have been — that several native-built freighters had been hidden within the system, their drives and anything else that might attract attention powered down. They'd been rapidly reactivated and put to work, allowing him to transport out more people than he'd believed possible. Even so, time was ticking away…

They'd completed transferring supplies down to Jackson's Folly hours ago, although *that* had been a fairly simple task. Colin had watched as Java and his various subordinates had taken delivery of the supplies, before fading back into the underground to prepare for the next invasion. If there was a next invasion… in Admiral Percival's shoes, Colin would have refused to launch another invasion until he received reinforcements from the Empire. It was a shame that the rebels didn't have any source close to Percival himself. Colin knew what Percival had to deploy against his forces, but what did he *intend* to do? Gauging intentions was an important part of intelligence work and Colin had no way of knowing what Percival was actually planning to do. Defeat the rebellion, obviously, before it got out of control… but how did he intend to do that?

"Admiral," the communications officer said. "The transports are signalling that they're casting off now."

Colin nodded. The orbital manufacturing complexes orbiting Jackson's Folly were now without the workforce that made them work. They were still intact — Colin hadn't even taken the opportunity to upload something nasty into their computers — but without their workforce, a whole new force would have to be trained up before the Empire could make use of them. They had the time… but did they have the patience?

“Good,” he said. He hated to cut and run, leaving the system completely defenceless, but there was no other choice. Besides, if they were really lucky, Percival would be diverting his superdreadnaughts towards Jackson’s Folly, allowing Colin to wreak havoc elsewhere. Only a fool would seek to command an interstellar war as if he could micromanage it, so Colin knew better than to count on it, but it would be useful if the superdreadnaughts were distracted. “Order them to flicker out now.”

The display updated rapidly as the transports flashed and vanished into flicker space, reappearing seven light years away at the first waypoint. There, they would be escorted back to the Beyond, where they would be unloaded, adding new strength to the rebellion. In the meantime… the rebel fleet had other plans, plans Colin had drawn up before the council had insisted on raiding Jackson’s Folly. They had been delayed long enough.

Colin smiled. Hester had — reluctantly — agreed to go back on the transport fleet, removing one worry from Colin’s mind. Hester might be too old to lead the fight in person, but she was an inspiration. The rebellion needed her, perhaps more than it needed Colin. Or perhaps that was just a kind of reverse vanity. It hadn’t been Hester who had captured nine superdreadnaughts and given the Empire its first serious fight in centuries.

“Helm, set coordinates for the reserved waypoint,” he ordered, calmly. Behind him, Jackson’s Folly would wait for the Empire to return, like a woman awaiting her rapist with a hidden knife. The Empire wouldn’t have any difficulty reassuming control over the high orbitals, but the ground would suddenly be much harder, if only because they would have to ship in a whole new army. “Take us out of here.”

His smile darkened as the superdreadnaught flickered out of the system, heading deeper into the Empire, heading towards Greenland. The second major Roosevelt-owned system and the perfect target, at least as far as Colin was concerned, for hitting it would drive the Roosevelt Family to fury. And Percival, the failed Admiral, would lose all hope of promotion.

And then Colin would come for him too.

Chapter Thirty-Three

"I assume," Percival said, in a cold hard tone, "that you have an explanation for this?"

Standing ramrod straight, her arms at her side, Captain-Commodore Angelika McDonald slowly counted up to fifty under her breath. She'd transmitted a report to Admiral Percival as soon as *Violence* had flickered into the system, hoping to discourage him or one of his subordinates from bombarding her with requests for details, but it hadn't worked. Admiral Percival had ordered her to report to him as soon as possible, using words that clearly meant *right damned now*.

"Yes, sir," Angelika said. She knew what Percival meant, but she was damned if she was going to allow him to place the blame on her. "I retreated in the face of superior firepower."

"You fled in the face of the enemy," Percival snapped. His piggy eyes glared at her, boring in on her face like twin laser beams. "The board of inquiry will…"

That did it. "With all due respect, *Admiral*," Angelika said, "perhaps you would care to explain how a handful of smaller ships are expected to defeat a squadron of nine superdreadnaughts?"

His face purpled alarmingly, but she pressed her advantage. "If you hold a board of inquiry into the battle, the board will discover that I fought as long as I could and then withdrew from the system, rather than getting my command destroyed for no reason," she added. "Once you ordered the superdreadnaughts withdrawn from the Jackson's Folly system, the rebels could come knocking on the door any time they liked. It was a disaster waiting to happen.

"Furthermore," she said. "I will not accept a tame board of inquiry. As is my right under Imperial Navy Regulations, I demand that the supervising officer be drawn from the nearest sector and made fully appraised of all of the important facts before holding the inquiry."

Percival stared at her, as if he were hoping that she would wilt under his gaze. Angelika felt, oddly, as if she was in a battle, one she would win as long as she held her nerve. She'd worked closely enough with Percival to know that he was both a coward and, despite his pretensions, alarmingly exposed. His patrons would shift away once they realised that they would be tarred with the same brush of failure, Percival's failure. He was the man on the spot when the rebels stole nine superdreadnaughts and vanished, never mind that Camelot was far too far away from Jackson's Folly for him to exercise any real control.

She found herself silently hoping that *her* patrons wouldn't let her down, for the regulations she'd cited could be put aside by a senior officer with sufficient patronage, or political clout. Or, for that matter, Percival could try to appoint one of his cronies to run it, just to ensure that it voted the right way. Her career had either been boosted beyond measure, or destroyed. But then, even a tame court-martial would expose Percival's own failings and his enemies would have a chance to destroy him.

"I realise that you retreated in the face of superior firepower," Percival said, finally. Angelika grinned inwardly. He'd surrendered, no matter whatever face he chose to put on defeat. "Even so, there is the issue of the loss of Jackson's Folly or the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Blackshirts, all of which need to be discussed."

"There's very little to discuss," Angelika said, calmly. "The Blackshirts were on a hostile planet when their covering forces had to leave the system." She thought about pointing out that if she'd stood and fought, the monitors would have been destroyed along with her force, but pushed the thought aside. "The locals will have taken their revenge by now. Imperial Law allows for only one response."

"There is nothing we can do until we make contact with one of the superdreadnaught squadrons," Percival said, weakly. "The rebels…"

"…Will have retreated from the Jackson's Folly system, leaving us nothing, but a rebellious planet and probably a few unpleasant surprises in orbit," Angelika said, interrupting. Who knew — perhaps Percival could be driven into having a heart attack. His death would strengthen the Empire. "If you send back a squadron of destroyers, you would be able to recover the system without serious losses."

Percival stared down at his priceless wooden table, muttering under his breath. Angelika took the moment to look over at the Admiral's aide and wink at her. The aide — a tall blonde woman with a jacket tighter than regulations allowed — looked back at her, expressionlessly. Angelika would have bet half her salary that the aide was smarter than Percival and resented being placed in a position where she had to turn his half-baked ideas into reality. If she could be turned, she would make a powerful ally, but Angelika lacked the patronage or clout to reach out and make an offer.

"And are you prepared to escort that force?" Percival demanded, finally. "Or will you remain here until your squadron is reformed?"

Angelika felt her lips thin angrily, but resisted the temptation to make sarcastic remarks. Camelot, as an Imperial Navy Sector Headquarters, was heavily defended at all times, but as she'd returned to the system she'd seen new weapons emplacements and hundreds of new orbital weapons platforms. There were so many of them that she

suspected that System Command would have some problems controlling them all as a unit. If she'd been in command of the system, she would have decentralised it, but Percival was too much of a control freak to allow it. Besides, he had plenty of enemies and one of them might take advantage of a decentralised network to attack him.

"Yes, sir," she said, refusing to rise to the bait. An accusation of personal cowardliness wouldn't look good on her record, although — coming to think of it — she couldn't remember any time in which Percival had been in serious danger. The man was a coward as well as a sadist. "My ships are already being restocked by the facilities at this system. Once the loading is complete, we will return to Jackson's Folly and reclaim the system."

Carefully, of course, she added privately. Whatever she had said to Percival, it seemed to her that the rebels might reason it out the same way — and deliberately lurk in the system to ambush her when she returned. Or perhaps they would be off wreaking havoc on the other side of the sector and wouldn't know that Jackson's Folly had been reclaimed for the second time. There was no way to know until she returned and investigated the system.

She smiled, as if she'd just had a bright idea. "Perhaps you would like to accompany us?" She added. "The crew would consider it a boost to their morale if their commanding officer was to be flying with them towards certain victory."

Percival hesitated. "I fear I cannot leave this base," he said, stiffly. Angelika snickered inwardly, knowing what he truly meant. He could have left Camelot in the hands of his XO and accompanied the fleet to Jackson's Folly, if he had wished to do so. "I will embark on a grand tour of the sector once the rebellion has been destroyed."

"Of course, sir," Angelika said. She stood to attention and saluted. "And with your permission, I will return to my ship and wait for the loading to be completed."

"Go," Percival growled. "And *Captain*, if you fail to reclaim the world for the Empire, just don't bother coming back."

* * *

Penny made sure to stay out of Percival's way as he stalked the compartment, clenching his fists and muttering under his breath as he railed against both Captain-Commodore MacDonald and many of his own well-born or well-connected subordinates. Penny had known that Percival had a tendency towards paranoia — it wasn't a bad trait to have if they really were out to get you — yet she was surprised at just how deeply it had worked its way into his mind. He hadn't been blind

to Brent-Cochrane's manoeuvrings — or his rather-less-than-subtle dig at his commanding officer — and now there was a second officer seemingly intent on pushing him over the brink.

She smiled inwardly as he bent over the terminal and tapped it rapidly, scrolling through sheets of reports provided by various star systems. He had ordered, against Penny's advice, that every star system and duty station was to report its status as often as possible — and fired off demerits and demotions for officers who failed to produce comprehensive reports. In theory, it should have allowed him a perfect image of the sector and how it was functioning; in practice, it was just another waste of time, a substitute for real action. She couldn't imagine Brent-Cochrane or another competent officer wasting his time with such garbage.

Angelika's position, Penny suspected, was stronger than she had known. If Percival had ordered a board of inquiry to convene, that board of inquiry would have had to look into everything, up to and including the original mutinies that had overwhelmed the Observation Squadron. And, even with a tame board of inquiry, there would be no way to hide the sheer scale of Percival's failures. By law, the details would have to be communicated to Imperial Navy HQ on Luna, alerting them to the problems in Sector 117. Thanks to the rebels, they were going to know soon enough anyway, but Percival's board of inquiry would sharpen a few minds. He might as well have signed his own death warrant.

"*Bitch*," Percival said, finally. He brought his hand hard down on the wooden table, shaking it badly. It was real Earth-born wood, a rarity so far from Humanity's homeworld, and it was worth more than Penny would ever see in her life. And yet, Percival was prepared to damage it, even to destroy it, just because he was angry. "That bitch presumes that she can dictate to me!"

Penny thought it was safest to say nothing and let him work it out of his system, so she pretended to pay attention as Percival raged, blaming each and everyone — apart from himself — for the disasters that had swept through Sector 117. He stormed backwards and forwards, banging his hand against the bulkheads and the desk, but he didn't lay a hand on her. Penny was relieved, but also puzzled. Had he sensed something about her, perhaps the hope she'd felt after Brent-Cochrane had welcomed her into his circle? Or had he just decided not to take his anger out on her?

"And so we have to find more Blackshirts and sent them to Jackson's Folly, where they too will be killed," Percival finished. "How many Blackshirts can we scrape up if we cut all of the garrisons in the Sector down to the bare minimum?"

Penny, who had worked the numbers out weeks ago, was ready.

“Around seven hundred thousand, sir,” she said, briskly. There just weren’t that many Blackshirts left in the Sector, not after the rebels had captured the first invasion force intact and devastated the second force months later. She would be very surprised to discover that a single Blackshirt was left alive on Jackson’s Folly. Percival had stripped out a sizable force for the first invasion and had to do the same for the second invasion. There might be an unlimited supply of Blackshirts — there was no shortage of people willing to join, be injected with tailored drugs and sent out to kill on behalf of the Empire — yet it took time to train up new ones. “I’m afraid that transport is also going to be a bottleneck.”

“Those goddamned raiders,” Percival exploded. Penny could only nod. She didn’t know how they’d done it, but the rebels had managed to get most of the rebel groups working together, specifically targeting Imperial shipping. Their targeted raids — they were so well targeted that she was sure that they had a source somewhere within Camelot — were having a dangerous effect on local shipping. “God damn those bastards to hell!”

Penny carefully didn’t mention a second problem. No matter how she looked at it, it was alarmingly clear that too much tonnage was disappearing for it to be raiders, unless the raiders possessed a fleet large enough to stand up to several battle squadrons. She hadn’t brought it to Percival’s attention, but she suspected that the true explanation was much simpler than they had realised. The ships were vanishing because their crews were mutinying against their superiors — or the shipping lines that held them in bondage — and setting out to find the rebels. It seemed impossible, until she looked at the freighter designs. There was no way they could all be secured without placing a company of Blackshirts on each and every freighter. And that, judging from some of the incidents on Imperial Navy starships, would do nothing for morale.

By her off-hand calculations, the shipping in Sector 117 was disappearing at an alarming rate, damaging the ties that held the sector together. What would happen then? There was no way to know for sure, but some of the planets simply couldn’t feed themselves, which would result in mass starvation. At least the rebels hadn’t been targeting cloudscoops, although that might change in a hurry. A shortage of HE-3 would ensure that interstellar shipping ground to a halt. And what would Percival do then?

She looked up as the door chime rang, insistently. Percival strode over to his desk and slapped his hand hard down on the release, opening the hatch. William Derbyshire entered and blinked owlishly at Percival, as if he were a mild-mannered professor rather than Imperial Intelligence’s Head of Station. Percival seemed to calm down

instantly; he might have been the Sector Commander, but a complaint from Imperial Intelligence would result in his demotion and transfer to the other side of the Empire.

"Ah, Admiral," Derbyshire said. He took a seat without being invited and pulled a sealed datachip out of his pocket, opening it with his thumbprint and inserting it into the desktop processor. "There has been something of a development."

He looked up as the symbol of Imperial Intelligence appeared on the display. "We have been tapping all of our assets in the Beyond to attempt to locate the rebels," he said. "It was not an easy task. The Beyond is a very paranoid place and even those who are well-known in the community don't know everything. Indeed, those who are well-known may know the least, because they're easy for everyone to find. The people maintain their privacy and mind their own business…"

"Sounds like paradise," Percival growled, impatiently. Derbyshire smiled, indulgently. "What did one of your tame mouthpieces find?"

"It would have to be a tame ear," Derbyshire said, absently. Penny realised that he was enjoying mocking Percival, or making him wait before he uncovered his secret. "We only use mouthpieces to spread lies and propaganda throughout the Beyond. We have been spreading propaganda about the rebels, but alas — the Beyond doesn't seem to believe us. I fear we may have lost several mouthpieces to their counter-intelligence teams."

"Never mind that," Percival ordered. "What did you learn?"

Derbyshire looked up at him. "Oh, nothing too much," he said. "Just the location of the rebel base."

Percival's mouth opened. No sound came out.

"One of our deep-cover agents was invited to the meeting where they announced their Popular Front," Derbyshire explained, grinning. "It took the agent some time to get to a more… open asteroid, but once he made it… why, the message was passed on to a covert team and sent back here. The commander made the call to come here directly, rather than continue with his program, and I'm sure that you will agree that he deserves a reward. I have taken the liberty of writing him a commendation in your name, as well as urging that he be promoted as soon as possible. The Empire needs minds that can react and adapt plans — or abandon them — at short notice."

At any other time, Percival would have exploded at the thought of someone else daring to use — even by proxy — his authority. Instead, he just stared at the desktop processor, as if it contained the key to eternal life — or, perhaps, to eternal patronage. Penny could almost read his thoughts. If he destroyed — or crippled — the rebellion, perhaps he wouldn't lose his power and position after all.

"Good," Percival said, savagely. "Do the rebels know that we

know?"

"I do not believe so," Derbyshire said, thoughtfully. "They may not, however, keep using the same base forever."

"So we move now," Percival said, sharply. He looked over at Penny. "What ships do we have on station?"

"Commodore MacDonald's squadron is the most powerful one on hand," Penny said. Percival scowled. It would mean putting the chance for glory in the hands of a junior officer he hated, but he would still be able to claim some of the credit. "If you waited two weeks, we could send one of the superdreadnaught squadrons or…"

"No," Percival said. His mood had completely changed. "I want you to write the orders for the good Commodore. She's to go capture the rebel base; I want the rebels here, in chains, for trial and execution. If the base cannot be captured, they are to blow it and withdraw."

"Yes, sir," Penny said. Watching Percival act decisively was odd. "I'll send the orders at once."

"And then report back here," Percival added. "I think we need to celebrate."

Penny nodded, keeping the disgust off her face.

* * *

Angelika received her new orders philosophically, although she noted that if her squadron happened to run into the rebel superdreadnaughts — again — the results were unlikely to be any better than the last time. She uploaded the coordinates into the squadron's navigational database, checked that all weapons and supplies were loaded into her ships, and then ordered her squadron to move away from the planet and the ring or orbital defences. Seven thousand kilometres from Camelot, her ships flickered out and vanished.

Chapter Thirty-Four

"There's nothing new on the passive scans, Captain," the tactical officer said. "The only shipping in the system are the asteroid miners and the local defence ships."

Captain Daniel Hawthorne nodded, forcing himself to walk back to the command chair and sit down. Peering over his officer's shoulder was accomplishing nothing, even though he was tenser than he wanted to admit. He wanted to see some action and, so far, they'd hung in the Greenland System for over two weeks without anything happening. They couldn't even rotate crew through the system's shore leave facilities. The orders from Commodore Brent-Cochrane had been simple. They were to remain in the system, unknown even to the local System Command, and wait. When the rebels arrived, they were to power up their drive and jump out of the system to where the Commodore and his fleet were waiting.

It was a mission suited to a destroyer — the smallest true warship in service — yet it wasn't one that suited Daniel, nor was it one fitting for a man of his seniority. He should have been commanding a heavy cruiser or maybe even a battlecruiser, but an evening of drunken rudeness to a senior officer had put an end to that. He'd been ordered to take command of *Snow White*, a destroyer, and all that his seniority could do was keep him from being summarily dismissed. Was it any surprise that he'd climbed into a bottle? It was far more surprising that Commodore Brent-Cochrane, having taken command of the squadron, had helped him to climb *out* of it and assigned him to new responsibilities. It went against the grain to admit that he needed help from such a young man — regeneration treatments or not, he would have been astonished if the Commodore was any older than forty — but perhaps it was working. Or perhaps not; he had been floating in orbit, all systems powered down as far as they would go without depowering his ship, for two weeks… and he was bored.

He glanced around the bridge, scowling as he studied the displays. The bridge was cramped — the seven officers on duty rubbed shoulders far more than they should — and cold, despite his uniform. The destroyer's sixty crewmen were good sorts, at least, but he'd heard the grumbles and knew that they didn't want to stay under blackout conditions much longer. Neither did their Captain, of course, yet he understood the importance of their mission. It wasn't something he could share with the crew.

"The rebels are very likely to target your assigned worlds," Commodore Brent-Cochrane had said. He'd positioned his ships in interstellar space, which was against doctrine, but would give them an

excellent chance of being able to respond to a crisis as soon as it appeared. “If they target your world, I want you to jump out and whistle up the troops without being detected. The rebels won’t have time to bring up their own sensors before you’re out of there.”

“Continue tracking the freighters,” he ordered. Like Piccadilly, Greenland was owned and operated solely by the Roosevelt Family. The Imperial Navy had been asked to stand guard in the system, reinforcing the two orbital fortresses and the hundreds of automated weapons platforms, but Brent-Cochrane had chosen to creatively interpret his orders. If the rebels did attack the system, he’d calculated, his force would have time to intercept before serious harm was done. It wasn’t an attitude calculated to please the Roosevelt representative at Camelot and Daniel was sure that angry messages were already burning up the light years towards Earth. “Perhaps we can run a few tracking exercises, or maybe just tighten up the scans.”

He settled back into his chair and tried to relax. Stacy Roosevelt had actually tried to issue orders directly to Brent-Cochrane’s squadron, a serious breach of military etiquette. Daniel rather hoped that she would be summarily dismissed from the Imperial Navy for gross incompetence — the Imperial Navy had lost ships before, but no one had ever managed to lose nine superdreadnaughts to a set of boarding parties — but he doubted that it would come to that. Her Family would manage to save her career, yet the Imperial Navy would probably try to send her somewhere harmless. There was no shortage of places to send young officers who couldn’t be trusted not to screw up on a more serious posting.

“Two more ships, Captain,” the sensor officer reported. Two new green icons flickered into life, new freighters heading down towards the planet. Interstellar trade within the sector was starting to die away now, even though the interplanetary trade was as strong as ever. Perhaps the rebel raiders were being careful about coming deep into an unfriendly star system, or perhaps they were just concentrating on exterminating the interstellar shipping first. Daniel scowled. *That* was where he should be, watching over helpless freighters as they moved from system to system, not wasting his time on a system that was perfectly capable of looking after itself. “One of the freighters has an unusual drive signature.”

Daniel looked up, interested. Any relief from boredom was welcome. “Is it a rebel ship trying to be cute?”

“Uncertain, sir,” the sensor officer said. “It could be the result of normal wear and tear, or it could be a Captain trying to pretend to be a merchant ship and not succeeding very well. We could try to slip closer and take a look at it, perhaps test the cloaking device against active sensors…”

"No," Daniel said, reluctantly. Sneaking up on a freighter was easy, as thousands of pirates and millions of dead spacers could testify, even without a cloaking device. *Snow White* could probably do it without losing her cover, yet he knew better than to try. The Commodore had been most specific. They were to remain undercover until — if — the rebels attacked and only then were they to break cover. "We stay here and remain hidden."

The sensor officer scowled, but nodded. Under cloak, they could remain hidden indefinitely, at least until they came close to the defences surrounding the planet. After what had happened at Piccadilly, the Roosevelt Family knew exactly what could happen to their other planets and had issued new orders. No starship was to be allowed to approach the defences without proving its identity several times over, using new identification codes that were being hand-carried from star to star. If *Snow White* ventured too close, the chances were good that the turbulence she would leave in her wake would be detected and she would be fired upon before she could identify herself. The last thing he wanted to do was die at the hands of friendly forces.

Daniel shared his frustration, but there was nothing he could do, apart from endless drills and repair work. He was proud of his crew, for all that they were fewer in number than he deserved, than he had earned through his years of service to the Empire. *Snow White* was a tight little ship, even if her previous Captain had insisted on decorating her with images of a dark-haired woman with extraordinarily pale skin. Some of the images were nude, yet still demure, as if the girl was imbued with inner dignity. Daniel had found the images haunting at first, but he had grown to love them over the years. He had no idea what the crew thought about it.

"Hold us here," he ordered. The two newcomers were heading down towards the planet, exchanging signs and countersigns with the defences. A Marine assault shuttle was already flying towards them, intent on searching the ships before they were allowed to come any closer. "I think it's time for a drill."

Without further delay, he hit a pre-programmed set of commands and the alert sirens began to blare through the hull.

* * *

"And so all of the repairs have been completed," Flag Captain Jeremy Damiani said. His statement was echoed by the other Captains, whose ghostly images floated in the middle of Colin's stateroom like spectres at a feast. The Imperial Navy might insist on

all such discussions being done in person, but Colin saw no reason to maintain an outdated tradition. Besides, he suspected that it was done so that the various commanders could show off their cooks and the Popular Front had no time for such nonsense. “We are fully combat-capable and raring to go.”

Colin smiled, knowing that Percival — assuming that he had an accurate report on the Battle of Jackson’s Folly — would be astonished and horrified to discover how quickly his ships had been repaired. Thanks to Daria — and, to a lesser extent Hester — he had tapped into a rich vein of talent in the Beyond, engineers and repair crews who actually knew what they were doing. The Imperial Navy might prefer not to educate its crews too much, but the Beyond had no time for such luxuries and Colin hadn’t hesitated to take advantage of it. The superdreadnaughts had swapped out all the damaged components and replaced them within days.

“Excellent,” he said. He glanced up at the commanding officer of the *General Grant*, which had been the main target during the Battle of Jackson’s Folly. “Are you sure that your ship is in fighting trim?”

“I am certain of it, sir,” the young commander said. Like Colin, he’d been an XO on the Observation Squadron before the mutiny and an enthusiastic participant from Day One. It was ironic, but if there was one thing that the Empire and the Popular Front had in coming, it was that neither of them would willingly give a superdreadnaught to a man they didn’t trust. Colin had decided, not without regret, to move the superdreadnaught officers elsewhere, just in case. “We had to go EVA to swap out some of the armour plates, but we’re back in order now and” — he grinned at Damiani — “raring to go.”

Colin smiled. “Excellent,” he said, again. The recon missions had already been dispatched to Greenland, although he had been reluctant to use the same tactic more often than necessary. By now, the Imperial Navy would know to look for a freighter that appeared to have been abandoned by its crew. Or perhaps they would be paranoid about everything that entered their system, with very good reason. The reports from his agents at Camelot had reported that Admiral Percival had started updating the IFF signals again, this time making it impossible for a ship to enter the inner system without being searched. “If there are no other concerns…”

He waited, but no one spoke. “This may be our most challenging encounter yet,” he added. The preliminary recon missions had suggested that there was nothing unexpected within the system, yet two armoured fortresses in orbit and thousands of automated platforms were nothing to laugh at, particularly when they couldn’t sneak up on the bastards and blow them away before they could react. “Once we get the recon data back from the gunboats, we jump in hard

and fast, concentrating on wrecking as much of the Roosevelt Family's investment as possible, before we vanish again."

Colin smiled ruefully at the thought. Standard Imperial Navy doctrine held that superdreadnaughts were only to be used for decisive attacks — and, of course, for intimidating anyone who might be questioning their loyalty to the Empire. The idea of using them for hit and run raids would have horrified his instructors, but Colin had discovered that the tactic worked very well. Certainly, battlecruisers had their advantages when it came to raiding — they could outgun anything that could actually catch them — yet there was something to be said for using ships so powerful that very little else could stand up to them… and besides, it wasn't as if the planets could run away. No one had yet succeeded in building a flicker drive powerful enough to transport a whole planet somewhere else.

"There's no point in pushing to actually take the planet," he concluded. He'd thought as much, but he'd resolved to remain flexible until he saw what they were actually facing. "We get in, wreak havoc and get out again. No heroics."

He smiled at their expressions and then made a show of checking his watch. "You have your orders," he said. "Good luck to us all."

Colin sat back as the holograms vanished, one by one. The Empire's standard etiquette was that sending a hologram was rude, unless the sender was bedridden or otherwise unable to attend. Personally, Colin had never understood it… but then, he had never really understood the point of many traditions. Percival, who had been a past master of political backstabbing, had once commented — in a moment of candour — that failing to maintain what society regarded as good manners was often seen as a sign of weakness. Among the Thousand Families, showing weakness was very likely to lead to disaster. Even so, Colin saw no reason to maintain the tradition and had no intention of allowing his fleet to adopt it.

"No heroics," Anderson said, from where he had been sitting on the other side of the cabin. "Do you think that that is going to make them cautious?"

Colin shrugged. There were some wilder souls in the rebellion who deserved their own independent commands, where they could indulge their taste for fighting without risking the overall plan. Once the newer starships started coming out of the shipyards the Geeks were constructing, he would be able to start assigning more officers to command slots, while ensuring that the superdreadnaughts remained firmly in the hands of his loyalists.

"I see no reason to risk ourselves here," he said, finally. "It isn't as if we can take the world… and it isn't as if we'd be allowed to keep it, even if we did take the world."

He changed the subject before Anderson could return to the issue. “Did you learn anything from the secret files?”

“Nothing,” Anderson admitted. “There was a great deal of data — some of which we can use for blackmail, or simply release it into the public sphere to cause confusion — but nothing relating to any long-term Roosevelt-led plans for this sector. I suspect that if Commodore Roosevelt knows anything about them — and I don’t think she does — the details would be locked up in her pretty head. You should have let me brain-suck her.”

Colin shook his head in disgust, although, if the truth were told, he wasn’t sure what he was disgusted *at*! Stacy’s secret files had included a great deal of blackmail material, including at least one Admiral and several civilian contractors who were into the most disgusting perversions, even by the standards of the Empire. No amount of protection, influence or wealth would save them if the information got out, which might have helped explain why Stacy had been allowed to maintain her command. Colin found himself caught between two possibilities; he could expose them, or blackmail them. His practical side suggested that blackmail would help the rebellion, but his vindictive streak suggested that releasing the information would ensure that the perpetrators got what they deserved. It had, quite simply, never occurred to him that anyone would be — could be — a greater pervert than Percival.

“No,” he said. “Do you have any theories?”

The Security Officer frowned, stroking his chin. “None,” he said, finally. “It could be a display of wealth intended to impress their fellows — they’re always boasting about how fabulously rich they are — but anyone they thought was worth the effort of impressing would already know how much money they have. Or… perhaps they wanted to create their own workforce and eventually dominate the sector…”

“They *already* dominate the sector,” Colin said. He was thinking of Lady Ellicott-Chatham. She didn’t have any connections to the Roosevelt Family, as far as he knew, but perhaps she would know something. Jason Cordova could ask. Colin was no expert in the arts of love, yet he was sure that Cordova was attracted to the girl. “Or maybe…”

The GQ alert sounded, interrupting him. “All hands to battle stations,” Damiani’s voice said. “Set Condition One throughout the ship; Admiral Walker to the CIC. This is not a drill; I say again, this is not a drill.”

Colin stood up, reaching for his jacket. “We’ll discuss it later,” he said. “Once the battle is over, we’ll go through the data again.”

The CIC was buzzing with activity when Colin stepped into the

compartment. “Report,” he ordered.

“The gunboats have returned, sir,” the tactical officer reported. “We’re getting the data download from them now.”

Colin nodded, pushing the other concerns out of his mind. It was time to make war.

“Show me,” he ordered. The display lit up with the latest data. There were no unexpected surprises within the system, although the weapons platforms in orbit seemed to be stronger and more numerous than the early reports had suggested. “Bring up the flicker drive and prepare to jump.”

He settled down in his command chair and waited for the other ships to report in, linking into the datanet binding the fleet together. “All ships report ready, sir,” the tactical officer said. “They await your command.”

Colin nodded. “Jump,” he ordered.

* * *

The sound of alarms echoing through the ship brought Daniel out of a fitful sleep. “Captain, this is Lieutenant Ellsworth,” a voice said. “Sir, multiple hostile warships have just flickered into the system!”

Daniel pulled himself out of his bunk, grabbed his jacket and raced for the bridge. “Begin powering up the drive,” he ordered, as he ploughed through the door. “Give me a report, right bloody now!”

“We have nine superdreadnaughts and assorted smaller ships,” the Lieutenant said, as he gratefully vacated the Captain’s chair. “IFF signals do not match anything in the updated database.”

“Prepare to take us out of here,” Daniel ordered. The sound of the drive powering up echoed through the ship. A destroyer’s great advantage was that it could flash-wake the flicker drive and be reasonably certain of arriving at the endpoint in one piece. The rebels didn’t know it, Daniel knew, but they had flown right into a trap. And the trap was about to be sprung. “Jump!”

A moment later, *Snow White* vanished from the Greenland System.

Chapter Thirty-Five

"Jump completed, Admiral," the helmsman said. The display flickered to life, revealing the Greenland System ahead of them. There was no point in trying to hide their presence, so the sensor departments were using their active sensors at full power. The freighters and the handful of warships within the system weren't responding yet, but they would. Even a blind starship captain would recognise the nine superdreadnaughts bearing down on the planet.

"All ships are reporting in," the tactical officer said. "All weapons systems are online and ready for activation."

Colin nodded, leaning back in his command chair and trying to project an impression of unconcern. "Launch probes, full spread," he ordered. It was possible that Percival had tried to hide a surprise within the system, perhaps another squadron of superdreadnaughts. Colin hadn't been able to decide if Percival would have the nerve to ask for help from Sector 99 or not. "I want every dust mote within this system tracked and logged."

"Aye, sir," the tactical officer said. "I am launching probes now."

The probes sped away from the superdreadnaughts, transmitting their findings back to the ships thought tightbeam lasers. Colin watched as they updated their results, confirming that there were no starships within the limits of detectable range. With cloaking devices, or a starship simply shutting down all of its systems and pretending to be a harmless asteroid, that wasn't as large as he would have preferred, yet even the Geeks hadn't been able to improve the sensor systems to the point where they could detect a powered-down starship drifting in empty space. They were still promising breakthroughs, but Colin would believe it when he saw it. He'd also like an FTL communicator, while he was wishing, or a superweapon that could take out a superdreadnaught in a single shot.

And while I'm wishing, I'd like a pony, he thought, with sudden amusement. He smiled, studying the display. Judging from the sensor probes that were sweeping up towards his fleet, the defenders of the planet had noticed their arrival and were preparing to put up a fight. Collectively, his fleet had more firepower than the two massive orbital fortresses covering Greenland, but individually… it was going to be close, or at least it would have been if Colin had intended to take the planet. The yellow icons representing orbital installations appeared below the orbital fortresses, their crews already abandoning ship in lifepods and shuttles, saving their lives. Colin had known, even though he had taken no pleasure in it, that they wouldn't have any time to issue warnings this time. They had to take out the facilities and retreat

before Percival sent in reinforcements.

"Good work," he said. The Geeks *had* managed to improve the control systems for the probes. While the Imperial Navy might be only able to launch six probes at once — or risk losing control of the additional probes — *his* ships could launch up to fifteen, *each*. It gave him an unprecedented level of tactical awareness, yet he had to keep reminding himself that merely having the probes didn't make him aware of *everything* within range. It was still possible for a bold or cunning ship's captain to slip close to his ships. "Helm… take us on the planned trajectory."

The superdreadnaught seemed to strain at the leash as she moved towards the planet, her weapons systems coming awake one by one and locking onto their targets. Colin smiled darkly as he took in the sensors emanating from the orbital fortress, wondering when her commander would choose to open fire. If Colin had been in his shoes, with as much firepower as he had at his disposal, he would have opened fire as soon as the starships came into range, even though it would have given Colin's point defence longer to lock onto and destroy the incoming missiles. It would have distracted the attackers — and their tactical sensors — from returning fire and it might, if the defenders were very lucky, knock out an external rack and damage a superdreadnaught's ability to fire.

Greenland was a second world that had been given an unusual level of development, thanks to the Roosevelt Family. Colin would have been delighted to have the small complex of shipyards and industrial nodes in orbit around the planet under his control. Indeed, given a few more years, Greenland would probably become the production capital of the sector — particularly after the pasting the rebels had given Piccadilly. Colin turned it over and over in his mind, but no explanation seemed plausible. The Roosevelt Family was either led by fools — which might have explained why they'd trusted the system to Stacy Roosevelt — or they had some deeper motivation for their actions. Whatever it was, Colin hoped, his war had put an end to it. And who knew what would happen to the Roosevelt Family — and the Empire — if they were unable to complete their plans?

He pushed the thought out of his mind as the small fleet crossed the invisible line in space marking weapons range. He'd planned to hold fire until they reached a closer range — the fortress had a powerful point defence system and it was surrounded by automated weapons platforms — but if the fortress had opened fire, he would have had to return it and use the external racks. The fortress seemed inclined to wait for him to get closer, which was odd, even though it was what he wanted. A chill ran down his spine as he contemplated the words of one of his old instructors at the Academy.

“If your battle is going according to plan,” the old man had said, two years before he’d been taken away for some political offence against the Empire, “you are about to lose. No battle plan has ever survived contact with the enemy and no battle plan ever will.”

Colin scowled, unable to suppress the feeling of imminent disaster. “Launch a second set of probes,” he ordered. The tactical officer gave him a surprised glance, but he didn’t argue, even though there was no overt reason to launch additional probes. “Prepare to engage the enemy.”

The fortress was finally coming alive, almost exactly when Colin had predicted, a compromise between range and speed. The shorter the range between shooter and target, the faster the missiles could travel… and the shorter time in which they could be intercepted. Colin watched the updating display for a long moment, checking that the fortress’s impressive salvo of missiles hadn’t been augmented somehow, before looking up at the tactical officer.

“Lock missiles on target,” he ordered. It was an unnecessary order, but Imperial Navy protocol demanded that it be issued. “Prepare to fire.”

“Missiles locked on target, sir,” the tactical officer said. His hands danced over the control systems, targeting the missiles on the massive fortress. Unlike the last fortress they’d destroyed, this one was fully aware of the danger and was prepared to meet it. Its point defence would take a heavy toll of Colin’s missiles, hence his willingness to spend lavishly in order to take out the fortress. “We are ready to attack.”

“Fire,” Colin ordered, calmly.

The superdreadnaught rocked sharply as she unleashed the first barrage from its external racks, just before tiny destruct charges separated the remains of the racks from the starship and pushed them into space. A moment later, the ship rumbled again as she unleashed the firepower of her internal tubes, the updated missile control systems taking control of both salvos and melding them together. The spread of ECM missiles, armed with jammers and decoys rather than standard nuclear warheads, followed afterwards, adding to the confusion. Depending on the skill of the enemy sensor techs on the receiving end — and the Roosevelt Family could hire the best, if they were so inclined — they might have problems separating out the real missiles from the decoys. Their screens would be showing over a *million* missiles bearing down on them.

Colin’s lips twitched, without humour. If he could have fired a million missiles in a single salvo, he wouldn’t have had to worry about Admiral Percival or the defences of Camelot. He could have waltzed into orbit, destroyed the defences with a single overpowering salvo

and accepted surrender from the remains of the facilities on the planet below. Once the arsenal ships were finished, the rebels would have a throw weight far greater than anything the Imperial Navy could fire back at them, at least for the opening salvo. The real question was how long it would take the Imperial Navy to come up with a counter-measure.

"Enemy are deploying point defence units," the tactical officer said. Colin nodded, unsurprised. The chances were good that quite a few missiles would expend themselves uselessly, but that was a given in any battle. "They're powering up…"

His voice broke off as new red icons flickered into existence. "Admiral," he said, his voice filled with sudden — unprofessional — horror. "Multiple contacts! Multiple *hostile* contacts!"

* * *

Commodore Brent-Cochrane couldn't resist the thrill that seemed to dance through his entire body as his small squadron powered up its drives and prepared to flicker into the Greenland System. He'd taken the risk of keeping the flicker drives on standby, even if it did shorten the lifespan of the drives by several years, knowing that success would lead to forgiveness. The angry memos from the Imperial Navy's Engineering Department — which seemed to spend most of its time inventing reasons why vital and costly repairs should not be carried out — would wash off his back like water, *if* he succeeded. His own engineers — who were on the ships and therefore deserved to be heard — had been more tolerant, but even they had warned that he couldn't do it for long. If the rebels didn't take the bait, he would have some explaining to do to the penny-pinchers back on Earth…

But the rebels *had* taken the bait! He raised a mental glass in a toast to Captain Quick, Percival's aide, knowing that her calculations had saved his position — and boosted it beyond measure. If he managed to bring Admiral Percival the head of the chief mutineer, or even destroyed the rebel superdreadnaughts, no one would be able to stand in his way. Admiral Percival would be disgraced and Brent-Cochrane would be in a good position to step into his shoes. His patrons back on Earth — the two families who had hoped that his parents would bring them together — would see to that. He rubbed his hands together with glee as he settled back into the throne-like command chair. It was time to wreak havoc on the rebels and save the Roosevelt planet, guaranteeing him the support and patronage of the most powerful Family in the sector. They'd drop Admiral Percival like a hot rock.

“Commodore,” the tactical officer said, flatly. “All ships are ready to power up.”

Brent-Cochrane grinned, unpleasantly. “Then by all means,” he said. “Take us into the fire.”

His ships were already moving through space at a considerable speed when the flicker drive engaged, sending a wave of nausea through the ship. Brent-Cochrane felt, for a second, as if he’d been punched in the belly, but he swallowed hard and stood up, studying the display that had appeared in front of him. They hadn’t got it quite right, he noted thoughtfully, but they’d certainly got close enough to shock the rebels.

“Transmit a demand for surrender,” Brent-Cochrane ordered. He didn’t expect the rebels to comply, but Percival had insisted, claiming that the rebels were too cowardly to put up a fight if they found themselves staring down the missile tubes of nine superdreadnaughts. He’d enlisted the aid of a staff psychologist to prove his case, yet as the psychologist wasn’t travelling with the squadron, Brent-Cochrane tended to disregard his opinion. It sounded a lot more like Percival was trying to cover his ass. Besides, a person who could lead a mutiny and then overwhelm and capture nine superdreadnaughts was clearly not a coward, whatever else he was. “And then prepare to fire.”

He settled back in his command chair, watching as his crew moved smoothly about their work. It had been painful and unpleasant — he could smell the stench of vomit from somewhere behind him — but they’d come out of the flicker on a direct course for the enemy superdreadnaughts. Whatever they did, there was no way in which they would be able to avoid engagement, which left one final question. How long did the rebels have before they could flicker out and escape?

* * *

Colin fought hard to maintain his composure, although part of him was relieved that the shoe had finally fallen. He’d sensed something was wrong and yet he’d done nothing… silently, he cursed his own error in not ordering them to fall back from the planet while they had the chance. The enemy commander had trapped them, almost perfectly. Whoever was commanding the enemy fleet was on the wrong side.

He pushed that thought aside as he contemplated the tactical situation, tossing options around in his head. His crew could handle the incoming missiles from Greenland. Luckily, the orbital fortress seemed to be holding its fire while the enemy fleet waited for Colin’s

surrender, although *that* wouldn't last. Colin had heard rumours about Household Troops firing on targets just to ensure that the Imperial Navy didn't have a chance to capture them. All of a sudden, those reports seemed alarmingly creditable.

The enemy commander, unless he had another trick up his sleeve, hadn't timed it just right, although given the problems with coordinating operations across light years, he'd done better than anyone could reasonably have expected. If Colin chose to continue towards the planet, even accelerating, he would be forced into a close-range action against the orbital fortresses, one where his ships wouldn't have the advantage. If he broke away from the planet, they would certainly be committed to a missile duel with the enemy superdreadnaughts… which, if they managed to run them down because of their higher velocity, would have a chance to bring them into energy range. And if *that* happened, the rebellion was finished, along with the superdreadnaughts. The enemy commander, intentionally or otherwise, had caught Colin between two fires.

Just for a second, Colin felt indecision creeping up on him, but remaining where they were would be the worst choice of all. "Signal the enemy ships," he ordered. "Tell them" — his lips twitched in delight — "*hell* no!"

"Aye, sir," the communications officer said. Whatever the Empire might say about fair treatment, or even forgiveness, they all knew better. The Empire would either execute them on the spot or dump them all on a penal world, with no hope of escape. "They're not responding."

The display sparkled with bright red icons. "I think they have responded," Colin said. Absurdly, a stray thought ran through his mind, reminding him of the lessons on human-alien interaction back at the Academy. Most of them had been about how important it was to teach the aliens that humanity was the superior race and any resistance would bring death, but some had been genuinely interesting. Aliens often had different ways of communicating than humanity, yet some ways of communication had been universal. Opening fire, for one, was a pretty good way of conveying threatening intent. "Helm" — he tapped his console for a moment, designating a new course — "alter course as specified."

"Aye, sir," the helmsman said. If he had doubts about the wisdom of the course, he didn't show them. Colin wouldn't have been surprised if he had. In order to avoid fire from the superdreadnaughts, he was flying alarmingly close to the orbital stations. The wave of incoming missiles the fortress had launched might have been battered down, evaded, or survived, but there were would be more coming at them soon. "We are altering course… now."

Colin nodded. Whoever was in command of the enemy ships would know, now, that he intended to fight. The only question remaining, therefore, was brutally simple. Could his ships survive long enough for them to power up their drives and escape?

* * *

"They rejected the officer," Captain Faulding said, in tones that suggested that it was a personal insult. "They refused even to discuss it with us!"

"They would have been stalling," Brent-Cochrane pointed out. He had half-expected the rebels to try just that, but he would have demanded that they powered down all of their systems before entering any discussions. They would doubtless have refused. "You may fire at will."

His superdreadnaught shuddered as another salvo was unleashed towards the enemy ships, which were rapidly reconfiguring themselves into a new formation. In theory, they possessed equal firepower to Brent-Cochrane's ships, which at least raised the possibility of the enemy commander electing to fight a duel with energy weapons. In practice, it wasn't too likely that Commander Walker would dare. Both sides would suffer horrendous damage, but Brent-Cochrane was in a friendly system and Commander Walker was… not.

He watched as the rebel point defence started to engage his missiles and scowled. Their point defence was more effective than he had expected… and he suspected that their damage control was even better. The ships were over-engineered — the Imperial Navy Design Board was composed of professional paranoids — yet that didn't explain the improved performance that the rebels were getting from some of their systems. For the first time, Brent-Cochrane had doubts about his chosen course of action. Would it not be wiser to put the plot to dislodge Percival to one side and unite against the rebels?

"Send a signal to Greenland," he ordered, softly. "Tell them that I want their Household Troops out here supporting us."

"Aye, sir," the communications officer said. There was a long pause as the rebels continued to move away from the planet, and then opened fire in unison. Brent-Cochrane let out a breath he hadn't known that he had been holding. There were no unexpected additions to their firepower. "Commodore, they're refusing, citing safety concerns…"

"Fuck them," Brent-Cochrane scowled. He smiled darkly. If the Household Troops refused to come and join the fight, they were damn

well not getting any of the credit. “Continue firing.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Colin watched, as dispassionately as he could, as the first salvo of missiles from the superdreadnaughts roared into the teeth of his point defence. Missile after missile vanished as the datanet designated them as targets and picked them off, but there were always other missiles to take their place. The enemy commander had been canny enough to load his external racks before arriving at Greenland and it had given him the throw weight to take a massive toll on Colin's systems. A handful of missiles slipped through the defence network and slammed against the shields, shaking the massive superdreadnaught as they struggled to remain on an even keel.

"No damage, but shields were nearly overloaded," the tactical officer warned. Colin nodded, sourly. The tactical instructors at the Academy had warned them, time and time again, that the opening barrage was the most important and he'd wasted his opening barrage on the orbital fortress. It *was* damaged — the superdreadnaughts had hit it quite badly — but it couldn't actually give chase. Moving with ponderous inevitability, the enemy superdreadnaughts were converging on his fleet, tightening the range. The only advantage the rebels had was that their missiles didn't have to fly so far to hit their targets. Colin wasn't unaware of the irony. He was in the same position as the enemy ships at Jackson's Folly. "The damage control parties are moving up replacement shield generators now."

The superdreadnaught rocked alarmingly as another missile slipped through the defences and struck the shields. It shouldn't have been so dangerous, but with so many impacts in so short a space of time there was a good chance that one or more of them would overload and burn out a shield generator, rendering the hull vulnerable. Superdreadnaughts were the most heavily armoured ships in space, easily able to take one or more hits, but even they had their limits. When missiles started exploding inside the hull, the ship was very close to being destroyed or crippled. It wouldn't make much difference, Colin knew; they were nowhere near friendly territory.

He looked up at the timer, counting down the seconds. He'd never intended to stay longer than an hour in the system, but he'd started recycling the flicker drives at once, just in case the defenders proved unusually robust. The enemy ships had ten minutes to cripple or destroy them before Colin could run; ten minutes… it might just be long enough. Their closing speed was slowing as Colin's own ships fought to increase speed, but it wouldn't be enough to save them from an energy duel. Two converging lines formed on the display as he ran through the tactical problem. The enemy ships would be within

energy range for at least a minute before he could run, which meant… the rebellion was on the verge of failing.

I will not allow it, he thought, thinking hard. The smaller ships could escape, of course, but that would just leave the superdreadnaughts vulnerable to the enemy ships. The Imperial Navy was ignoring the smaller ships, choosing to concentrate on his superdreadnaughts, even though the smaller ships added a great deal of point defence to the formation. It wasn't a poor tactic either. There were hundreds of rebel starships out there, but only nine of them were superdreadnaughts and, without the superdreadnaughts, none of the smaller ships posed a major threat. *I will not…*

He glared at the display, as if staring at it would somehow change reality. The basic fundamental tactics of space warfare hadn't changed in centuries, even though the technology had been improved until there was little room left for improvement. He'd been trained in the traditional school… and all of his training was telling him that it would come down to a brute force encounter between two squadrons that were, at least on paper, equally matched. If the enemy had brought both of their superdreadnaught squadrons to the party, Colin knew, they would have had to surrender or they would have been certainly destroyed.

Or perhaps we don't have to destroy them, he thought, suddenly. The tactical instructors had talked about the decisive victory, the victory that would destroy the enemy's space navy and crush his systems in one blow. Small wonder, really, when the last war the Empire had fought against an alien race had been against one that possessed only nine star systems when they'd been discovered. The Empire had no concept of a long war, which meant…

"I want you to shift our targeting priorities," he ordered. Both sides had been shooting at each other, merely concentrating on getting in a few hits per salvo. The damage, such as it was, would be largely random. "I want you to concentrate on disrupting their drive fields."

The tactical officer looked up, new hope apparent in his eyes. Each of the enemy superdreadnaughts were surrounded by a drive field; knock out the drive field and the superdreadnaught's speed would be instantly cancelled as the laws of physics reasserted themselves. It would take the superdreadnaught's crew time to replace the damaged drive nodes and regenerate the drive field… the only risk was that the enemy ships would start doing the same to his ships. It couldn't be helped. Given enough time, he was sure that the enemy commander would start thinking in the same terms.

"Yes, sir," the tactical officer said. His hands danced over his console. "Do you have any targeting preferences, sir?"

Colin hesitated. If they had been able to identify the enemy command ship, he would have targeted it on general principles, hoping that the enemy commander — it bothered him, absurdly, that he didn't know who he was facing — would either relocate his ships to cover his ass, or would be killed. He'd checked the IFFs against the Imperial Navy registry, but the enemy commander — for whatever reason — had chosen to scramble his IFF signals, probably to prevent Colin from doing exactly that. It was against regulations, yet if he succeeded in killing Colin and breaking the rebellion, all sins would be forgiven.

"The closest enemy superdreadnaught," he said, finally. "You may fire at will."

* * *

"The enemy ships are altering their targeting priorities," the tactical officer said. "They're targeting *General Napoleon* specifically."

"Interesting," Brent-Cochrane mused. The two formations were still converging and there was nothing the rebels could do to prevent that, so had they decided to try and knock out one of his ships before they entered energy range? Or had they just decided to be annoying? The rebel ECM was better than anything he could deploy and it wasn't easy to be absolutely certain of their actions. The disruption caused by the missile explosions were screwing up the sensors. Even hardened systems were having problems.

He watched as the rebel attack developed. Standard doctrine, at least when the two sides were evenly matched, insisted that each ship should pair up with an enemy ship and exchange fire. The rebels had clearly decided to throw standard doctrine out of the airlock… and he had to admit that it made sense. If they knocked out one of his ships, or even discouraged her from taking part in the general pursuit, they would find it easier to escape. He glanced up at the timer and swore. How long would it take for the rebels to power up their drives and escape? His ship shuddered as she launched another spread of missiles, adding to the chaos, yet the rebels were proving alarmingly effective at knocking them down. As far as their sensors could tell, the rebels had only lost a handful of shield generators and had managed to replace them before the Imperials could take advantage of it.

"Adjust our point defence to cover the *Napoleon*," he ordered, slowly. The rebels might have just given the crews of the remaining ships a break, allowing the full point defence of his ships to be focused on covering a single ship. The rebels had launched full spreads from each of their ships towards her, yet… it would be an interesting

struggle. “Continue firing on the rebel ships.”

On the display, *General Napoleon* started to fall back as the rebel attack roared towards her. Brent-Cochrane considered it absently, knowing that when a missile plunged past its target it was almost certainly not going to have the chance to alter course and engage. A smart missile would probably find itself another target towards the rear of the formation, or maybe just detonate and hope to confuse the sensors. The superdreadnaught staggered under the weight of so much fire, despite everything her sisters could do to defend her, and then fell out of line. For a moment, Brent-Cochrane allowed himself the hope that that would be the end of it, just before the superdreadnaught disintegrated into an expanding sphere of overheated plasma.

There was silence in the CIC. The Imperial Navy hadn’t lost a superdreadnaught in combat since the First Interstellar War; technically, that hadn’t even *been* the Imperial Navy. Ships had been damaged, mothballed, repaired and replaced, yet no superdreadnaught had been lost in a battle. Brent-Cochrane felt cold ice congealing in his chest. The Empire was dependent upon the superdreadnaughts to maintain order, using the ships to intimidate everyone else into behaving themselves. Time and time again, the Empire had displayed its will to crush dissent and punish rebellion a thousand times over, using the superdreadnaughts as the blunt instruments of its will. The superdreadnaughts were invincible. Even the mere threat of a superdreadnaught was enough to compel submission.

And now the magic was gone. Whatever happened, Brent-Cochrane knew that the entire galaxy would soon hear of the day a superdreadnaught — perhaps more than one — was destroyed by rebels. Word would spread from planet to planet, from ship to ship, and others would start wondering if it might be possible to beat a superdreadnaught after all. The loss of a single ship would ignite a fire that would burn the galaxy, even if the rebellions were smashed without further ado. His superiors would not be pleased.

“Continue firing,” he ordered harshly. The rebels might not have lost a ship, but their ships were clearly taking damage. “Do not let up on the bastards!”

“Aye, sir,” the tactical officer said.

The superdreadnaught rocked as another missile slammed home. Brent-Cochrane saw another red light flare up on the internal systems display, before fading to yellow as the computers decided that it wasn’t so dangerous after all. He clenched the handles of his command chair and ran through the tactical equations in his mind again, checking his first thoughts and concepts. No matter what the rebels

did, they were going to enter energy weapons range in three minutes and then… they would see. Even if they wrecked his squadron in the crossfire, they would never survive being trapped in the unfriendly system.

* * *

Colin gritted his teeth as another wave of enemy missiles came slashing in towards his ships, a handful making it through the point defence and slamming into the shields. This time, they were unlucky as energy leaked through the shields and gorged into the hull, knocking out both missile tubes and point defence weapons. He tapped his console, bringing up a status display and scowled. The battering his ships were taking was reducing their ability to defend themselves, which ensured that the battering would only get worse. His crew worked hard to defend themselves, but the odds were slowly turning against them.

"Admiral, we have lost three more shield generators," the damage control officer reported. Colin cursed under his breath. The work of a few hours in a shipyard, or even a day or two if they had to fall back on their own resources, was impossible when under fire. Even if the generators were recoverable, they had to be powered down and checked carefully before they risked reinstalling them. "If we lose one more…"

"Understood," Colin said, tartly. There was no need to spell out the consequences. One more shield generator being destroyed, or knocked out, would mean that part of their hull would be permanently exposed to enemy fire, rather than small gaps appearing in the shields from time to time. The enemy would detect the sudden weakness and move to exploit it, aiming their missiles to go through the gap and slam directly into the shields. "Rotate the remaining generators to cover our rear."

He leaned back in his command chair, watching the bloody inventory of damage flowing up in front of him. The enemy ships had to be taking the same battering — he knew that his ships were handing it out as well as taking it, even though the enemy had refrained from trying to target one of his ships specifically. He wasn't sure why the enemy had refused that… until it suddenly clicked in his head. If the enemy managed to knock out their flicker drives, they'd won. They'd just fall back and wait for reinforcements before closing in on Colin's trapped ships. It was clever, too clever. He studied the enemy formation again, trying to pick out the command ship, but there was no way he could identify it. The enemy commander was too

smart for that.

The timer was ticking down, showing three minutes to escape — if they lasted that long. The other timer was far less encouraging. In two minutes, the enemy ships would be within energy weapons range, and then all hell would break loose. At such short range, the battle would become one of mutual slaughter, but then… the Empire could afford to lose a superdreadnaught squadron or two if it stopped the rebellion.

* * *

Captain Travis Ward cursed as the enemy superdreadnaughts grew closer, although he wasn't sure who or what he was cursing. The enemy, for being clever enough to ambush the rebel fleet, Admiral Walker, for flying right into an ambush… or himself for being stupid enough to believe in a scarred woman called Hester Hyman. He'd fled one world as the Imperial Navy overran it, only to discover that the Empire just kept moving outwards, like a tidal wave of destruction that smashed everything it touched. *Valiant*, his cruiser, was the last remaining starship from the Kingdom of Thayne. The Empire had overrun the system with its normal calm efficiency and all Travis had been able to do was take his cruiser and go on the run. The Beyond had taken him and his crew in, given them a home, but there had been no hope for his world — or for his family, trapped under the Imperial Navy's blockade. Travis had no way of knowing if they were alive or dead.

He could have jumped out and fled, yet something kept him in his place, something more than the fact that the Imperial Navy seemed to be ignoring the smaller ships. The Popular Front had given him hope and, even if he was more than a little cynical about their prospects, it had meant the world to his crew. Like Jason Cordova, they could never go home again, unless the Empire was beaten. And the best hope for defeating the Empire seemed about to die.

"Prepare to flicker," he ordered, keying his console. If Admiral Walker needed time, Travis and his crew would buy it for him. Running was simple, but he had a far more dangerous stunt in mind. "And then remove all the governors from the flicker drive."

His crew didn't argue, even though they understood what he was proposing. "Yes, sir," the helmsman said. Turning and charging towards the enemy ships would be a quick way of committing suicide without harming the enemy, but he had another idea. "I have laid in the course, sir."

"It's been a honour, gentlemen," Travis said. He keyed his console

again, accessing files that he had never even looked at since he and his crew had gone into exile. His wife and children, permanently young and unscarred, photographs taken before the Empire had arrived. “Jump!”

Scientists had long known that it was possible to use a flicker drive to add additional velocity to a starship, yet it wasn’t a practical tactic because the effects overwhelmed the compensators and killed the crew outright. *Valiant*, her course already laid in, flickered through space and rematerialised right in front of one of the superdreadnaughts. Before the enemy ship could react, the cruiser rammed the superdreadnaught and exploded.

* * *

“What the hell?”

“Unknown,” the tactical officer said, sounding equally puzzled. The explosion had been extremely powerful, powerful enough to burn out the superdreadnaught’s shields and drives, leaving it floating helplessly in space. “I don’t know.”

Colin looked up at the timer. The Imperial Navy ships seemed to have slowed, if only so their commander could figure out what had just hit him. Colin had no intention of giving him time to figure it out. If they kept slowing, they might just manage to escape…

* * *

Brent-Cochrane’s first thought was that the rebels had invented a new weapons system after all, but that didn’t seem likely or his entire squadron would have been destroyed by now. The waves of distortion coming from the explosion was making it harder for his sensors to work out what had happened, or why. Doubtless one of the analysts would figure it out eventually, but until then… his ships had actually lost speed in the confusion. He cursed and ordered the ships to maintain course. Even through the rebels had nine superdreadnaughts to his seven, his sensors were making it clear that the rebels no longer had their full battery of firepower at their disposal.

He gritted his teeth. The battle wasn’t over yet.

* * *

“Flicker drives ready, Admiral,” the helmsman reported. Colin

almost sagged with relief, but held himself together through sheer force of will. “We are good to go.”

“Get us out of here,” Colin ordered. “Jump us out now!”

A moment later, the damaged superdreadnaughts and their remaining escorts vanished from the Greenland System.

* * *

“They’re gone, sir,” the tactical officer said.

Brent-Cochrane shrugged. “So they are,” he agreed. It looked bad, but then, he’d damaged the rebel ships and prevented them from scoring another easy victory. And, if Public Information couldn’t spin that into a great victory, they weren’t worth the money the Empire lavished on them. “Signal to all ships; stand down from condition-one and forward updated damage reports to me.”

His grin grew wider. “And add a further signal,” he added. “Well done.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

"Just how bad is it?"

The Chief Engineer rubbed his forehead. The fleet had been holding position nine light years from Greenland while they conducted a preliminary assessment of the damage and planned repairs. Colin had also sent half of his crew to their bunks to rest, knowing that the stress of the battle would have tired them out, too much to risk allowing them to help with the repairs. The superdreadnaught's Chief Engineer, a man who should have held a far higher rank in the Imperial Navy, had refused to be put to bed. His beautiful ship had been badly damaged.

"Not as bad as it could have been," he admitted, finally. Colin wanted to shout at him, to demand answers, but they were both on the verge of collapse. His Flag Captain had urged him to get some sleep himself, yet he had refused, knowing that he had to oversee at least the preliminary repair work. "The main armour plating held up remarkably well."

Colin nodded, impatiently. If the battle had gone on for a few more minutes, even without the enemy ships slipping into energy range, it would have been disastrous. The shields had been on the verge of complete collapse, rendering the hull vulnerable to enemy fire… even so, enough had leaked through the shields to leave parts of the hull scorched and blackened. The bombardment against the shields themselves had been almost as bad, leaving hundreds of components burned out or badly damaged. And seventeen crewmen were dead, killed by the enemy. After the number of loyalists Colin had killed, it seemed painful, almost as if he had killed them personally.

It was not a rational thought. But they'd followed him and now they were dead.

"So the structure is intact," the Chief Engineer continued. "We have already begun swapping out compartments from the storage bins and replacing the burned-out systems. Given a few days, we should be back at roughly eighty percent, perhaps more if we manage to fabricate some new components here. If not, we will have to go back to base and complete the repairs there. The main priority is replacing the shield generators and we don't have enough spares to replace them all."

"And once they're burned out, they can't be repaired," Colin said, in understanding. He had never been trained as an engineer — the Imperial Navy preferred to separate the various departments, mainly through invisible lines of command — but he knew the basics, if only

through making himself the master of *Shadow*, back before the mutiny. Shield generators were built to withstand and contain vast levels of energy, redirecting it away from the ship or even into storage power cells, yet when they were overloaded they vaporised. Four of the deaths had occurred when shield generators had exploded and damaged the starship's interior. "Can we fight?"

The Chief Engineer shrugged. "Depend what you want us to fight," he said. "If we run into another squadron of enemy superdreadnaughts, one that is in top condition… we're dead. The squadron we escaped might be able to kick our ass if they ran into us now, even though we did take out one of their ships and cripple another. Something smaller… a battlecruiser squadron, perhaps… I wouldn't want to fight if we could avoid it. We are not in a good state right now."

"Yeah," Colin said. He'd been running through the entire battle in his mind. They'd been committed to a missile dual the moment the enemy superdreadnaughts arrived, ensuring that damage would be roughly even. The suicide of the *Valiant* and her crew had saved the lives of his crew — and saved the rebellion from coming to an abrupt end — yet he couldn't order anyone to do that again. Guilt threatened to leech up and overwhelm him, even though he knew that he hadn't ordered the suicidal tactic. "What about our drives?"

"The flicker drive is intact and usable, once we complete the first level of repairs," the Chief Engineer said. Colin sighed in relief. Being stranded in interstellar space would have been disastrous. By the time they limped back to the nearest inhabited star — which was controlled by the Empire — the rebellion would be over. "We lost five drive nodes in the final moments of fighting and we need to replace them before we can power up the drive field to its fullest extent. I suggest that we don't attempt any more high speed chases until we complete repairs."

Colin snorted. The chances were good that he wouldn't be the one making that decision. Or perhaps not; if they crawled back to Sanctuary, they could make repairs and return to the war as good as new, backed up by the arsenal ships and the other new designs the Geeks had produced. By now, the first squadron of arsenal ships should be ready for deployment. And, unless he missed his guess, some idiot was going to start second-guessing him and claiming that he should have waited for them to join his fleet before attacking Greenland.

"Get some sleep," he ordered, finally. It was probably time to take his advice and get some rest himself. "We'll stay here for two more days and then start flickering home."

He'd considered the possibility of the enemy superdreadnaughts

coming after them, but if they'd been able to track Colin through the jump they'd probably have been on top of him by now. It was a gamble, but with an overstressed squadron of starships Colin suspected that there was no other choice. If the drives and other systems were stressed much further, they might suffer a catastrophic failure, stranding the fleet. Or perhaps the enemy were just waiting for reinforcements. Colin hated being uncertain of what to do, or even second-guessing himself, and yet he couldn't avoid it now. They'd come within a whisper of losing the battle and the entire rebellion. The Popular Front would be meaningless without his fleet.

The thought tormented him as he returned to his uncomfortably large cabin and settled down in the bed. Stacy Roosevelt hadn't been content with a standard Navy-issue bed; no, she'd brought in a designer bed from some overpriced company on Earth and decorated it in her own frilly style. Colin had the bedding replaced, yet it was still too comfortable for his tastes, as keyed up as he was. He tossed and turned for nearly an hour before surrendering to the inevitable and injecting himself with a mild sedative. Even so, he was still tense when he awoke and climbed into the shower. The flow of hot water helped to calm his mood.

"I require an overall damage report," he said, once he called his nine Captains and their Chief Engineers to a conference. Their holograms had materialised in his quarters, apart from his own Chief Engineer, who was busy working on replacing the damaged drive nodes. "How badly off are we?"

He kept his face expressionless as the damage reports rolled over him. Six superdreadnaughts were in the same condition as *General Montgomery*, with minor damage that would take time and effort to repair. Two more had suffered worse in the battle, including some structural damage that had been caused by warheads exploding against the hull. No smaller ship could have survived such an impact, yet even so Colin knew that repairing the superdreadnaughts was vital. They couldn't operate without the squadron.

"We need to replace two of the main struts running through the ship," the Chief Engineer of *General Grant* admitted. Given that the *General Grant* had been badly damaged during the Battle of Jackson's Folly, Colin suspected that some of the damage was caused by the remains of earlier damage, including damage that had been supposed to be repaired. No matter how hard they worked at it, field repairs were not comparable to work done in a shipyard. "Without those…"

Colin could imagine. The superdreadnaught might, if it was lucky, survive… if it didn't have to fight, or run. If one of the main struts broke, it wouldn't a complete disaster, but two of them would require immediate repair before the ship started to shake itself apart. Colin

had been a young Midshipman when the light cruiser *Candy* had suffered a structural failure and disintegrated while in flight. Her Captain had been lucky not to survive the incident, as his reports, studied by the Board of Inquiry convened after the disaster, had clearly shown that he had been aware of the danger and ignored it.

"We can shore it up for the trip back home" Colin smiled, for the Rim had become home for them now — "and then replace it, but I cannot recommend that we take the ship into battle," the ship's Chief Engineer concluded. "Any attempt to go to full military power will be disastrous."

Colin nodded. "How long will it take to replace the struts once we get home?"

The Chief Engineer considered. "Roughly two weeks, assuming that we have a strut on hand that we can modify and fit into the superdreadnaught," he said. "If not, then *Fabricator* will have to manufacture a replacement strut — that might be the better option, as the Rim probably won't have one that we can modify for a superdreadnaught — "and that will add an extra few days. Call it twenty days in all."

"I hope you're not padding your estimate," Colin said, tiredly. He didn't know who had started the engineering tradition of overestimating repair times — if only so the engineer could look like a miracle worker — but he had no patience for it at the best of times and definitely none now. Twenty days… it sounded reasonable, yet who knew what Percival could do with that time?

"No, sir," the Chief Engineer assured him. "We may be able to cut it down to eighteen if we work additional shifts, but I doubt that it will be possible to cut it down any further."

"Right," Colin said. He looked up at his Captains, all of whom had known him from before the first mutinies. "There's no point in hiding from the truth. We lost the battle and we were lucky to be able to extract ourselves without losing a superdreadnaught or two."

There were no arguments. If they'd been in the Imperial Navy — *still* in the Imperial Navy — they would have had to come up with elaborate justifications to prove, if only to their superiors, that it hadn't been a disaster. Colin remembered helping Commodore Percival come up with excuses to explain failure, all of which had been required to avoid giving his many enemies more ammunition to use against him. Now… Colin's new navy didn't have a tradition of painting defeats as victories and he had no intention of starting such a trend. It made it impossible to analyse what had actually happened.

"We got jumped," he continued. "That leads us to two possibilities. First, we were simply unlucky; the Imperial Navy staked out likely targets and we just flew into one of them. Second… we were

betrayed and they were there to meet us. I want you all to consider the possibilities and we will discuss countermeasures once we are safely back at base."

He dismissed them and settled back into the sinfully-comfortable chair. If a single Imperial Intelligence agent *had* managed to remain undetected, who was he and why hadn't he tried something more overt? Come to think of it, how had he managed to deduce the target and warn the Empire? Colin had picked Greenland himself and none of his crew had been told until they were underway. The only ones who had known were his Captains, but if one of them intended to betray him, they could have betrayed him back at Jackson's Folly and the mutiny would never have got off the ground.

And yet… Imperial Intelligence had a reputation for being subtle. Could they have decided to allow the mutiny — and rebellion — to go ahead purely for some reason of their own? Colin considered it for a moment before dismissing the thought as nonsense. No one in their right mind would allow a rebel fleet to run amok in a sector and wreck planets belonging to one of the most powerful Families in the Empire. Unless Imperial Intelligence was secretly working against the Roosevelt Family and… no, that had to be nonsense too. Their position would never survive such operations.

Colin looked down at his hands, scowling. The mind techs were good, with terrifying reputations. It was quite possible that one of his inner circle had a secret personality, one implanted by Imperial Intelligence and programmed to serve as a spy. It was almost impossible to detect such a personality, if only because the victim *thought* that he was loyal and, if interrogated under truth drugs or lie detectors, would swear to his own loyalty. And yet, that theory fell down too, because the loyalist personality would never have allowed him to launch the mutinies.

The simplest answer was that they'd simply gotten unlucky. The Empire had set a trap and Colin had flown right into it. Even so… he keyed his console and called Anderson, issuing some very specific orders. If there was a spy onboard, witting or unwitting, they would find him before he could do any more harm.

* * *

Penny had seen Percival in a temper before; indeed, she had suffered at his hands when he'd been in a furious mood. He'd beaten her badly when he'd been told that he didn't have the level of patronage required to move closer to the Core Worlds — where the possibility for graft and personal enrichment were endless — and

again, just after the first mutinies had been reported. Now… he seemed torn between anger and delight, a dizzying combination. The first reports of the Battle of Greenland had just arrived, leaving Percival in the uncomfortable position of having to thank the man he suspected was plotting to unseat him.

Brent-Cochrane was shown into his office, his face alight with a dark smile and darker mischief. Penny felt her heart leap at the brief look he gave her, just for an instant, before he stood to attention and gave Admiral Percival an Academy-perfect salute. The white beret he had perched on his head, an insolent jab at his superior officer, was swept off, followed by an aristocratic bow. The performance did not appear to delight Admiral Percival at all.

But then, Penny knew, it wouldn't have. If the Battle of Greenland had been truly decisive, it would have been *Brent-Cochrane* who had won the battle, cleaning up Percival's mess. He would get all the credit, while Percival would be investigated for his failure to detect and prevent the mutinies before it was too late. Even with Commodore MacDonald on a flight into the Beyond to destroy the rebel base, hopefully leaving Commander Walker without his supplies and logistic backing, Percival might never manage to save his reputation.

"Admiral," Brent-Cochrane said, every inch the naval hero. "I beg leave to report that we have defeated the rebels in the Greenland System."

Percival was controlling himself, but Penny — who had seen him at his most vulnerable — could tell that he was on the verge of an explosion. It was tempting to think that Percival would lose control completely and end his own career, yet his instincts for political survival were too strong. Despite herself, she was curious; what would Percival do to get rid of the imprudent junior, her secret ally?

She listened as Brent-Cochrane outlined the victory. It hadn't been a perfect victory — and it had been costly — but it was an unambiguous victory. Public Information would ensure that the story was told everywhere, mocking the rebels who had dared to believe that they could bring down the Empire. The loss of a superdreadnaught — and another one effectively out of service for some time — was worth it. If the rebels had a shipyard capable of building superdreadnaughts and replacing their losses, the Empire would have been destroyed a long time before Commander Walker had launched his mutiny.

"Good work," Percival said, finally. He sounded more normal, which meant that he'd thought of a plan. "Once the rebel bases are destroyed, we will be able to put an end to the rebels and their rebellion."

He glanced over at Derbyshire, who had been listening with a patient smile. “I trust that the plans for Operation Purge are complete?”

Derbyshire nodded. “Yes,” he said, flatly. Operation Purge — the Imperial Navy’s move into the Beyond — was predicted on destroying the rebel base, preventing them from mounting a new offensive. The squadrons of lighter craft would be reformed and then dispatched into the Beyond, following a targeting list drawn up by Imperial Intelligence. Every known colony in the Beyond would be destroyed, along with their inhabitants. They wouldn’t even be given a chance to surrender. “Once Commodore MacDonald returns victorious, we can begin.”

Penny noticed the flash of calculation that passed across Brent-Cochrane’s face before it was masked behind his vague smile. “Commodore,” Percival said, “you have done well. *However*, the loss of a superdreadnaught requires a board of inquiry, one chaired by a Sector Commander. You will report to Admiral Quintana of Sector 99 and he will chair the board of inquiry. You will also report to him on the rebels and the need for reinforcements in this sector.”

Brent-Cochrane’s face was expressionless, but Penny could see the anger smouldering behind his eyes. Percival was right; technically, regulations *did* require a board of inquiry, particularly when a superdreadnaught was involved. On the other hand, given that Brent-Cochrane had just delivered a real victory, the only victory of the war, Percival could have waived the requirement. It might not stop Brent-Cochrane’s star from rising any higher, but with some luck, it would keep him out of the sector long enough for Percival to win the war.

“Yes, sir,” Brent-Cochrane said, finally. What else could he say? “I shall report to him at once.”

Penny saw Percival’s smile and knew that he thought he had won. Somehow, she was sure that it wouldn’t be so easy.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

"Only two more jumps, Captain," her XO said. "And then we will be there."

Captain-Commodore Angelika McDonald smiled at the younger man's enthusiasm. Officially, flying beyond the Rim — the line marking the edge of the Empire's territory — was forbidden without special permission, but it didn't take a tactical genius to realise that enforcing that law was completely impossible. The only legitimate reason to pass beyond the Rim was to survey new planets for settlement, a task normally carried out by the Imperial Survey Service. Someone with as much wanderlust as her XO was probably in the wrong branch of the service.

There was no real difference between the stars on one side of the Rim and the other, but there *was* a sense of isolation, as if they were completely alone. It was illusionary, yet she could feel it herself. The ship's doctor had been prescribing additional sleeping draughts and pills for the crew, while the illicit stills operating below decks were churning out additional booze. Angelika knew that some captains would have cracked down hard on the stills, or insisted on taking a cut for themselves, but she didn't care as long as the crew was sober when they reported for duty. She'd had a drunken crewman publicly lashed to make the point clear, along with busting the crewmen operating the still down to the lowest possible grade and confiscating their funds. It had worked, or at least no crewmember had turned up drunk while on duty.

"Good enough," she said, studying the display. They'd barely had time to complete their repairs at Camelot, but she'd been determined to get out of the star system before another battlecruiser or even heavy cruiser squadron returned from patrol duties and got given the plum assessment instead. Destroying the rebel base and capturing the rebel leadership would go a long way towards making up for the Jackson's Folly disaster, at least in the eyes of any competent review board. Her connections would make sure of that, preventing Percival from burying his mistakes under a mountain of paperwork and false accusations. "Keep monitoring the surrounding area. You never know what we might find out here."

She smiled, ruefully. The ban on travelling beyond the Rim had fuelled all kinds of speculation and stories about what starships encountered when they broke the law and travelled deep beyond the Rim. There were strange stories of mysterious bat-shaped starships; encounters with omnipotent entities… even discoveries of ancient super-technology amid the ruins of a dead civilisation. The Empire

officially ridiculed all such claims, but Angelika had heard rumours that Imperial Intelligence had a secret department devoted to investigating them. She'd asked a few of her most trusted contacts and they'd either professed to know nothing about it, or had warned her not to ask any more questions. She'd taken the hint.

Centuries ago, after the First Interstellar War, an alien race had somehow become aware of the advancing Empire… and of how it treated non-humans. Possessing a formidable technological infrastructure of their own, the aliens had built a fleet of starships and fled, not before ensuring that their world held nothing the human race could use to find and locate them. The Runaways, as they had been called by the humans who had finally discovered their homeworld, had not been seen since, although there were always rumours. One of them was that they had set up a base somewhere in the Beyond and were preparing to wage war on humanity. That rumour had served as a justification for all kinds of emergency measures, which had somehow never been repealed.

"Aye, Captain," her XO said.

"And run through a set of combat drills," she added. She'd wanted to take Marines with her, but Admiral Percival had flatly refused, citing concerns about their loyalty. Instead, she had Blackshirts who were supposed to have been trained in raiding asteroid settlements. She wasn't too encouraged, although the ones on her ships had been surprisingly civilised. They certainly hadn't been drugged up like the ones assigned to operations on the ground. "I want to be ready for anything."

Her XO frowned. "Captain," he said, reluctantly. "What do we do if we run into the rebel superdreadnaughts again?"

Angelika scowled. "We run," she said. There was no other answer. "We cannot stand up to superdreadnaughts."

* * *

"And so production levels are estimated to continue to rise," the Geek said, in his strange mechanical voice. Hannelore barely heard him. She was too awed — and horrified — by how the three Geeks had mutilated their own flesh with implanted systems. One of them was little more than a brain in a jar, mounted on top of a vaguely humanoid robot; the others had replaced parts of their flesh with weapons or tools. They clicked and whirred as they spoke. "The new workers are very enthusiastic."

"Good," Hester said. Her whispery voice wasn't much better, a living reminder of the Empire's brutality. "I trust that Captain Cordova

will also be pleased when he awakens…?"

Cordova looked up as Hannelore elbowed him. Unlike Admiral Walker, Cordova made no pretence of enjoying the meeting, although Hannelore was certain that he was listening and mentally recording everything in his mind. He looked half-asleep, his eyelids closed and his elbows on the table. The Geeks didn't seem concerned about the rudeness — they had no real social graces themselves — but some of the other rebels looked put out. Cordova was, after all, the designated military commander in the absence of Admiral Walker.

"I have no doubt that improving our stockpile of missiles and other weapons systems will be very useful," Cordova said. He didn't *sound* tired, which at least suggested that it had been an act, rather than a serious refusal to pay attention. "I provisionally approve your plans, with a warning that Admiral Walker may have other ideas."

The Geeks didn't seem to mind. "We have been studying warship design for centuries," their leader said. Hannelore had never been able to figure out how they'd chosen their leader, or even how they conducted themselves when away from more normal humans. It was possible, she supposed, that they were real party animals on their own, but she doubted it. They seemed to veer permanently between being loners and seeking the respect and admiration of their fellows. "We can improve upon many of the Empire's current designs."

"Any Chief Engineer who actually earned his position could do that," Cordova said. He seemed fully alert now. "I am reluctant to take untested designs into combat and I suspect that Admiral Walker will feel the same way. A design more complex than the arsenal ships may well have unsuspected flaws."

"Simulation is not reality," the lead Geek said. The other two nodded in unison. The effect was almost hypnotic. "We will test the designs thoroughly before we start mass production. Once mass production had begun, we will be producing new units at a speed considerably greater than the Imperial Navy's shipyards."

Hannelore sat up sharply as the Geek's words echoed in her mind. "The Imperial Navy's construction process is deliberately inefficient," the Geeks said, flatly. "Their senior officers accept bribes in order to source components. Workers are taught the minimum they need for their work and nothing else, nor are they encouraged to offer suggestions or thoughts, even ones that might boost profits. Our construction process will not suffer from those problems. With the addition of the supplies from the Annual Fleet, we will be able to expand production quite rapidly."

One of the rebels Hannelore didn't know leaned forward. "If that is true," he said, "couldn't we just withdraw and wait to build up our attack fleet? How long would it take to put together a fleet that would

be a significant challenge to the entire Imperial Navy?"

"Twenty-seven years," a Geek said.

Hester shook her head. "By then, the Empire will have started its own construction program," she warned. "They know now that their precautions are… insufficient to prevent us from operating almost at will and they will take corrective measures. How long would it take for us to build up a significant challenge if the Empire is aware of our threat and enters the race?"

"Uncertain," another Geek said. "The Empire's very structure makes it difficult for them to expand or improve production on a massive scale. Assuming that they push their own rules and regulations aside — and that they start educating commoners, which adds its own risks — they would be able to start a massive expansion program within three to four years. Once they were underway, they could just keep going; bear in mind that their starting point is considerably in advance of our own. We might not be able to out-produce them at all."

Hannelore sighed as the argument developed, with both sides waving facts and statistics at the other. She rather understood Cordova's desire to sleep during the meeting, even though it had been partly billed as a chance for her to meet the other rebels and start understanding her duties. It wasn't anything like a conventional position. The various production facilities scattered through the Beyond were reluctant to disclose their location to anyone, particularly someone who hailed from the Thousand Families. Intellectually, she understood their concern, yet she found it irritating. How was she supposed to do her job if they didn't trust her to do her job?

"I think it's time to call a recess," Hester said, finally. "Jude — can I remind you that you agreed, along with the rest of us, to put political decisions aside until the war was won. This isn't the time or place for arguing about what is going to happen once we defeat the Empire, or what is going to be done to reform it."

Jude — a short dark man whose face bore the signs of a botched regeneration — nodded angrily. "I speak for those of us who fled the remains of Paradise," he said, insistently. "We are not receiving our due! We have fought when you…"

"*Enough*," Cordova said, sharply. The entire room looked at him. "We have to win the war before we start arguing over the peace. If you don't want to take part in the Popular Front, I suggest that you withdraw now and save us some trouble. If you do, then cooperate instead of demanding rights and promises that we are in no position to give you."

His gaze swept around the room. "Let's be honest with ourselves,

shall we? We all came here because it was safe, because it was a place to hide. We lurked along the Rim and, over the years, we became timid. We told ourselves that we would build up our forces and one day retake out worlds. Did we do that? No, we didn't fucking do that!"

He slammed the table, hard. "No, we found it preferable to sit and dream of the future than to actually do the hard work of overthrowing the Empire," he added. "If we stop now, we will still be kidding ourselves in twenty years time that we're still not ready — and that we will *never* be ready. This is the best chance we are likely to have to reform the Empire and create a universe we can all accept, even if it isn't perfect. Now tell me — do you want to throw that chance away?"

No one spoke. "I thought not," Cordova said. He looked over at Hester. "I suggest that we reconvene tomorrow and complete the planning then, once tempers have cooled."

"Yes," Hester said, flatly. She tapped the table. "I definitely think we should complete our discussions tomorrow."

Hannelore followed Cordova as he strode out of the meeting room and back into the network of rocky corridors that made up the rear of the asteroid. He didn't seem surprised to see her following him, but he said nothing until they reached the airlock connecting the asteroid to the *Random Numbers*.

"I'm going onboard my ship for a break," he said. "The crew needs some drills and I intend to oversee them. And I need a drink and a nap, perhaps not in that order. Politics always leaves me feeling dirty."

"So do I," Hannelore said, too quickly. She hadn't realised what she was planning until the words came tripping out of her mind. "Perhaps we could take a nap together."

She felt her face flush as Cordova looked back at her, as if he were half-expecting her to change her mind. The boys in the Imperial City on Earth were very forward, particularly the ones who were born to the most powerful of the Thousand Families, and they had considered girls like Hannelore their rightful prey. She'd had to punch one of them out once for pushing his luck too far, not something that had pleased her family. Cordova… she was sure that he was attracted to her, yet he'd done nothing about it. And if she were wrong, she'd just destroyed their chances of developing a working relationship.

"I would like that," Cordova said, slowly. He reached out and pulled her into a hug. His lips touched hers, first softly and then with increasing force. Hannelore felt her body respond to his caress, even though his beard was tickling her lips. His tongue slipped out and into her mouth, drawing her close to him. It was suddenly very hard to breathe properly. "Coming?"

He pulled her towards the airlock and through the hatch, both of

them giggling like schoolchildren. The guard on the far end of the hatch saluted Cordova, but kept his expression carefully blank as Cordova escorted her through the corridors and up into Officer Country, where he opened his cabin and invited her inside. The cabin was warm, but his lips were warmer. From the urgency of his hands as he started unfastening her jacket, it had been a long time for him, perhaps longer than it had been for her. There had been no one she could risk taking to her bed at Tyler's Star.

She gasped in delight as his lips roamed over her breasts, kissing, licking and sucking them, even giving them tiny bites. Cordova was a far more experienced lover than the callow boys back on Earth and it showed. It was suddenly urgent to get out of her trousers and panties, even though her hands were occupied trying to get his own clothes off. He took his hands off her for a second to pull off his jacket and she took the opportunity to start kissing her way down his body. His chest was covered in scars, as if someone had whipped him badly long ago and the scars had never faded away.

Gently, he picked her up when they were both naked and carried her over to the bed, laying her down and kissing her before mounting her body. Hannelore felt his hand slide between her legs, stimulating her just before he slid deep inside her, his lips coming up to meet hers. She cried out, clutching him to her, and then all thought was forgotten, lost in the pleasure roaring through them both.

* * *

Hannelore was, at first, unaware of where she was or what she had been doing. The lights in the room were dim, reminding her of too many adventures as a young girl, when she'd been experimenting with her peers and ending up in too many strange beds. The noise that had awoken her echoed again and she sat up, memory coming back in a sudden flash. She was in Cordova's cabin, on the *Random Numbers*, and she'd just had sex with him. She giggled as Cordova turned over — his back, too, was covered with scars — and sat up, reaching for the communications terminal. He hoped he had the sense to only use the vocal function, although, if the truth were told, she didn't much care if his crew got an eyeful. She felt sore, but good.

"Captain," a voice said, "we are holding position as per your orders. Do you wish to commence the drill now?"

Cordova looked vaguely guilty, even though the speaker couldn't see him. Hannelore had to cover her mouth to stop another fit of the giggles. She had wondered how he would treat her in the morning afterwards — if it actually was morning — and now she would

probably never find out. Her mother had told her that that was the true clue to a man's character, but for men like Cordova, duty always came first. Or perhaps not; he had delayed the drill for his own gratification, after all.

"Not yet," Cordova ordered. "I want the gunnery crews to work on their deployments and the engineering crews to work out what we need from *Fabricator*. We may as well try to upgrade the ship before Colin returns with the superdreadnaughts."

The terminal clicked off and Cordova turned to look at her. Hannelore didn't manage to prevent the giggles this time and, a moment later, he joined her. He had a deep throaty laugh. She reached out and ran her hand down one of the scars, feeling it against her fingertips. It didn't feel pleasant.

"What happened?" She asked. Had someone tortured him in the past? "Why…?"

"I'll tell you one day," Cordova said. His hand came up and caught hers, bringing it to his lips. "It's a long and complicated story and I wish to do it full justice."

His other hand reached out for one of her breasts and stroked it gently. "And you're unmarked," he mused. "Do you have any idea how lucky you are?"

Hannelore wasn't certain how to answer, but the howl of the alarm saved her. Cordova let go of her at once and dived for the terminal. "This is the Captain," he said, sharply. "Report!"

"Captain, we have a full squadron of battlecruisers dropping in on us," the XO snapped. Hannelore felt her blood run cold. "They're heading right towards Sanctuary! They've found us, sir."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

"Launch probes," Angelika ordered, as her stomach settled after the jump. "Get me a tactical analysis of the system!"

The rebel base — assuming that they'd been given the right coordinates — was located in orbit around a red dwarf, a star that the Empire would consider worthless. The system itself had been briefly surveyed by the Survey Service, catalogued and abandoned, having been rated as not suitable for exploitation. The rebels, having fewer needs to support, had moved into the system and set up home amid its asteroid fields. They would have to ship in fuel as the system had no gas giant, but that wouldn't be a problem. There was no shortage of gas giants in the Beyond.

"I am picking up low-level drive emissions from the target cluster," the tactical officer reported. The battlecruisers were heading right into the asteroid field, something that would only be alarming to a person with no knowledge of space. She could have flown the entire Imperial Navy through the asteroid field and never risked ramming an asteroid with one of her ships. It required real incompetence or deliberate malice to crash a ship into an asteroid. "I suspect the presence of at least nine starships, perhaps more. They are trying to escape, Captain."

"Anyone would think that they had something to hide," Angelika said, wryly. She had suspected that they'd been sold a bundle of junk by Imperial Intelligence — it wouldn't the first time that the Imperial Navy had been sent on a wild goose chase — but it was clear that there was *something* in the system. Whatever it was, it was big and unregistered, which made it illegal by definition. Even if they were attacking an asteroid base belonging to a group that had nothing to do with the rebellion, Public Information would turn it into a successful strike against a rebel base. "Can you zero in on the target asteroid?"

The display tightened up as the probes zoomed closer, sending their readings back to their mothership. The asteroid was odd, shaped rather like a club, yet it was clear that there was something powerful inside, for it was radiating all kinds of emissions. An impact crater towards the rear of the asteroid was the most powerful source, suggesting that it held the spaceport and that the rebels were trying to flee before the might of the Imperial Navy.

Angelika tightened her lips as the battlecruisers spread out. If they had wanted to destroy the asteroid, they could do it before anyone had a chance to escape. A single salvo of missiles would crack the asteroid like an egg and throw its inhabitants into the unforgiving vacuum. She would have preferred that solution — the longer she

played with them, the more time the rebels would have to think of a way to defy her — but Admiral Percival's orders had been clear. The rebel leadership was to be dragged back to Camelot for a show trial and then execution. Angelika would have argued, but Percival's aide had pointed out another factor. If they merely blew up the asteroid, they would never know who they'd actually killed — if indeed they'd killed anyone.

"Open a channel," she ordered. Even rebels, traitors and pirates would keep a listening watch on the universal emergency channel. "Attention rebels; this is the Imperial Navy. We are advancing on your asteroid and you do not have the firepower to repel us. I advise you to disarm your weapons and await the arrival of Imperial troops, who will take you into custody. Any starship attempting to leave the asteroid will be fired on without further warning. You have three minutes to respond."

She drew a finger across her throat, ordering the communications officer to cut the channel. "Bring up full active sensors and paint that asteroid with everything we have," she ordered, as she settled back into her chair. "I want to have everything on the surface pinned down before we enter weapons range." She looked over at the tactical officer. "If any starships disengage from the asteroid, you are authorised to fire at will."

"Aye, Captain," the tactical officer said. His hands danced over his console, selecting shipkiller missiles and priming them for action. Angelika suspected that at least some of the rebels would be considering trying to flicker out from where they were docked; perhaps even from inside the asteroid itself, but only a complete lunatic — or someone with nothing to lose — would risk such a stunt. She smiled, humourlessly. The rebels had nothing to lose. "Nine more starships have started to power up their drives."

"Continue broadcasting my demand for their surrender," Angelika ordered, as new icons flickered into existence on the display. The asteroid wasn't entirely toothless, unless they were trying to bluff her into retreating; they had rock-mounted weapons and even a handful of remotely-controlled automated weapons platforms. Given that she'd worried about the possibility of a repeat encounter with the rebel superdreadnaughts, or perhaps even a stolen orbital fortress, it was something of a relief to see that the defences were so puny. "Tighten up our sensor locks and prepare to take out all of their weapons. I do not want them to have even the slightest chance of being able to harm our troops."

"Aye, Captain," the sensor officer said. "All sensors are operating at maximum capacity."

Angelika smiled and leaned forward, counting down the seconds.

If the enemy commanders refused to surrender in two minutes her ships would commence with a precision bombardment that would strip them of anything that could take the fight to her. If they had stealthed weapons platforms waiting to engage her, they would be forced to reveal themselves before they could be picked off and destroyed. She could afford to take her time. The rebels, quite literally, had nowhere to go.

* * *

Hannelore had never dressed so quickly in all of her life — she had left some of her underwear lying on the deck, so great was her hurry — yet Cordova still beat her to the bridge. *Random Numbers* was on full alert, with every station manned and the crew ready to fight — or run. Hannelore had been impressed with Cordova's crew before — they acted more like professionals than anyone from a pirate band or even some of the other rebel ships — but now they were definitely showing their mettle. With nine battlecruisers bearing down on their position, there was no sign of panic or even healthy fear.

"Report," Cordova ordered, as he took his command chair. He looked vaguely surprised to discover that Hannelore had followed him onto the bridge, yet he merely waved her to a spare chair and winked at her. "What is our status?"

"Under cloak, full stealth protocols are in effect," the XO said. He sounded calm and focused. "They have not pinged us as far as we can tell; our drives and shields are stepped down, minimizing our turbulence. We should be effectively undetectable."

"Let's hope so," Cordova growled. On the main display, the battlecruisers swept past where the heavy cruiser was drifting and advanced towards the asteroid. They seemed both implacable and very confident, as if they knew that they had all the time in the universe. Hannelore had no idea what defences had been put into place to defend the asteroid against the Imperial Navy, yet she doubted that the rebels could have installed enough to deter the battlecruisers from advancing. "We have to hold our position here and record everything."

Hannelore looked up, surprised. "You mean… we're not going to do anything to help?"

"There's nothing we can do," Cordova said, sadly. He looked angry and helpless, his fists clenched against an unreachable enemy. It was the first time, Hannelore realised, that she had seen him without the mask he used to cover his thoughts and feelings. "If we attempt to draw the battlecruisers away, they will either ignore us or dispatch

one of their ships to chase us and leave the rest besieging Sanctuary. All we can do is watch and wait."

"But…"

She broke off. She wanted to argue, to tell him that there had to be something they could do to save their cause. She hadn't even realised how much it had become her cause until it was in mortal danger, yet… there was nothing they could do, apart from committing suicide on their behalf. The Imperial Navy had come to call and brought along enough firepower to render any defence irrelevant.

"Don't worry," Cordova said, as if he had read her mind. "This isn't the only base. There are others and the Imperial Navy will never find them all."

They weren't supposed to be able to find this one either, Hannelore thought, sourly.

* * *

"They have not responded," the communications officer said, as the timer ticked down to zero. "They didn't even attempt to discuss terms."

"We offered," Angelika said. The asteroid's population was either part of the rebel leadership or supporting the rebel leadership. The former would go in chains and be transported to Camelot; the latter would be sent to a penal world. It made perfect sense for the rebels to refuse to surrender, which opened up its own risks. They might believe that they could destroy their asteroid and take out hundreds of Imperial soldiers at the same time. "Prepare to close to engagement range."

She smiled as the enemy defences, the pitifully weak defences they'd installed, came into range. "Target the enemy weapons platforms first," she ordered. "You may fire at will."

A second later, *Violence* launched her first salvo against the rebel base.

* * *

The command centre was filled with panic, Neil was disgusted to discover. The rebels hadn't had a formal command structure for the base — it hadn't been designed for permanent occupancy — and most of the workers worked for one group or another, rather than pledging themselves to a single force. Sanctuary had no real government or defence force. His Marines — and the recruits they'd been running

through combat training — were the only defence the asteroid had.

"They've opened fire," an operator shouted. Neil cursed his luck. In the Imperial Navy, an operator who started to panic while on duty would be summarily removed from duty and transferred to a posting where they couldn't do so much harm. Even the well-connected would tend to be removed from their positions. "They're firing on us!"

"Get a grip, man," Neil snapped, using his best Drill Sergeant voice. It had an immediate effect. As he had thought — and prayed — the staff wanted someone to tell them what to do. "They're not firing on the asteroid; they're firing on the defence platforms. Unlock them and get them firing back, now!"

Most of the operators got to work, but one of them folded his arms and looked defiant. "Who are you," he demanded, "to give us orders?"

Neil could have explained, pointing out that he had more active combat experience than everyone in the room, but he didn't have the time. He settled for punching the speaker in the head and knocking him out, leaving his body to collapse on the floor. The remainder of the staff took one look and suddenly became a great deal more attentive, although Neil had to remind himself to watch his back. He wouldn't put it past some of them to draw their weapons and shoot him in the back when they had the chance.

He keyed his personal communicator and linked into the private frequency used by high-ranking officers. "Mrs Hyman, we have to defend the asteroid," he said. He had already considered all of the possible means of escape, only to conclude that there was no way out of the trap. The Imperial Navy could destroy any ship before it had a chance to power up the flicker drive and escape. Attacking into the teeth of such firepower would be suicide. Perhaps he could slip a handful of people out in a stealthed ship with powered down drives and weapons systems, yet even that was doubtful with so many sensors operating at full power. The Imperial Navy certainly wasn't bothering to hide. "I need your permission to coordinate the defence."

"Granted," Hester said. Whatever else she was — and Neil still harboured a trace of the old disdain for those the Imperial Navy called terrorists — she was decisive. She would have made a good Marine if she had ever gone through the training centre. "Do whatever you have to do to secure the asteroid and defeat the invaders."

Neil relaxed slightly. With Hester's backing, the operators should do as they were told without any more backchat. He leaned over the main display — it had been designed by the Geeks and operated on a different scale than the ones he was familiar with — and scowled to himself. The Imperial Navy was easily swatting down the weapons platforms, while their probes swooped closer to the main asteroid,

looking for future targets. It wouldn't take long for the starships to turn their attention to boarding the asteroid and by then he had to be ready.

"Put a general signal through the asteroid," he ordered, trying to deduce what the enemy intended to do. If he was facing fellow Marines, they would try to land on the rocky surface and burn through into the inhabitable sections of the asteroid, denying him any warning of where they intended to land. But if the reports were true, if the remaining Marines in the Sector had been removed from duty, they were facing Blackshirts instead. Where would Blackshirts choose to land? "I want my Marines and trainees to assemble, in full combat armour, in Section 45-66-K."

He leaned back, suddenly feeling a great deal more certain. The Blackshirts weren't trained for raiding asteroids. The chances were good that they would try to come in through the spaceport facility, an isolated section towards the front of the asteroid. They wouldn't have any difficulty in locating it either, not with the crews of nearly thirty starships struggling to power them up and escape before the Imperial Navy got there and opened fire. They didn't know it — or didn't want to believe it — but they had already lost. The battlecruisers were well within missile range.

"Women and children are to go to the core of the asteroid and remain there," he added. "They are to wear their suits and prepare for explosive decompression. Armed men are to assemble in the inner circle and prepare to defend the women and children against the incoming threat."

"There are a lot of arguments, sir," one of the operators said. He was casting nervous glances at the unconscious figure on the deck, wondering if he was going to be the next one hit and knocked out. "They want to get into the front lines and start fighting the enemy."

"Tell them that they will get their chance," Neil said, impatiently. He drummed his fingers on his knee as he considered the possibilities. What did the Imperial Navy want? If they had wanted to destroy Sanctuary, they could have done it by now and nothing the rebels had could have stopped them. No, they had to want to take the leadership alive, as well as everyone else they could catch. Locked up inside their brains, waiting for the mind techs to come along and investigate, were the names and coordinates of most of the other rebel bases. "I'm sure that they will get their chance."

He looked up as the hatch opened and Hester entered, followed by two of her bodyguards. "Get that piece of shit out of here," she said, pointing one finger at the sleeping operator. The bodyguards nodded and obeyed. "How does it look, Major?"

Neil blinked in surprise. Hester was wearing a suit of body

armour and carrying a helmet in one hand. It wasn't cheap equipment either. It might not have been quite up to the standards of Marine combat armour, but it would be more than sufficient against most threats. A sniper could probably have taken off her head before she put the helmet on, yet… somehow, he was sure that no sniper would ever get so close to her. Her bodyguards didn't look incompetent.

"It looks good," he said, reluctantly. He had always hated giving briefings to political leaders, yet Hester was something special. "We should be able to stall them long enough for Admiral Walker to get back."

Hester nodded, her eyes elsewhere. "And if we can't?"

"We die," Neil said, flatly. If the Empire was prepared to expend enough troops, they could take the asteroid, even if the rebels retreated into the inner core and fought hard to hold on to the core regions. Sanctuary didn't even have a united datanet or shared infrastructure. Given time, and sufficient imagination, the Empire could make life very uncomfortable… and that was if they didn't decide to cut their losses and blow up the asteroid. "There are no other alternatives."

Hester nodded, hefting her rifle. "I understand," she said. "It's time to fight or die."

The asteroid shuddered suddenly. "They're opening fire with penetrator missiles," one of the techs said. "They're knocking out our weapons, one by one."

"As I expected," Neil said. He felt the old thrill rising up within him, even though he knew that they were all going to die soon. Unless Admiral Walker got back; no, even if he did, the Empire would still be able to blow up the asteroid and run. "And then will come the assault."

* * *

Angelika watched dispassionately as the last of the rebel weapons platforms were blown into vapour, clearing the way for her assault troops. She had wondered if the rebels would blow up their asteroid or dare her to hit them with heavier weapons, but the assault plan was going perfectly. Without their weapons, there would be nothing to stop her troops from landing on the asteroid.

"All ships, this is the Commodore," she said. "Dispatch the landing force!"

Chapter Forty

"You are clear to launch," the voice said in his earpiece. It was a sultry female voice, promising much to the heroes when they returned — if they returned. "Good luck."

Captain Thomas Wilson took a breath as the launch tubes opened and the assault pods were blasted out towards the asteroid, accompanied by a hail of decoys and sensor jammers intended to prevent any surviving rebel weaponry from locking onto them and blowing them into the next world, even though the squadron claimed to have destroyed all such weapons. Thomas had enough experience with such claims to know that they were often over-optimistic and, as the commander of the assault, he wasn't going to take any chances with his men and their lives.

He could hear the beating of his own heart and feel the sweat on the palm of his hands as the pods fell towards the asteroid. It grew in his vision, changing from just another rock to something that dominated the entire horizon. At some point, up twisted and became down and he started to fall towards the rocky ground, cursing as enemy weapons started to light up, their plasma bursts picking off a handful of pods. The starship crews hadn't got them all! The tiny automated missiles escorting them dived forwards and attempted to destroy the weapons, but not before seven of his men and ten decoys were picked off and killed. An eighth man was so badly injured that his suit had to put him into suspension and scream for immediate recovery.

Thomas braced himself as the pod touched down and split open, allowing him to step out onto the surface of Sanctuary. They had landed below the massive crater that seemed to serve as a rebel spaceport, yet as his teams formed up it became evident that the rebels had taken the precaution of hiding additional defences in the ground. The Blackshirts picked them off, advancing towards the lip of the crater and over it, staring down into the spaceport. The gravity was doing odd things as they passed through varying gravity fields — the rebels, instead of spinning the asteroid to produce gravity, had chosen to install a gravity generator instead — and he cursed under his breath. He had trained his men hard, rather than trusted to the drugs and indoctrination most Blackshirt units used, yet they hadn't been trained to work in such an environment. It was a tribute to their training — and their superior officers, who had wanted a dedicated unit for operating in space — that they were doing as well as they were.

The rebels had divided the spaceport into two sections. One,

dominated by starships clinging like limpets to the asteroid, was visible to his eyes. The other, with starships passing through a massive hatch to rest inside the asteroid, was clearly closed off. The hatch would require high explosives to blast it open, yet there was an easier way into the asteroid. He led his platoon towards the first freighter, ordering the other teams to spread out and target the other ships. Not entirely to his surprise, the first freighter rose up into space as his team approached, spinning around and preparing to flicker out. The missile that slammed into the ship and blew it cart-wheeling away from the asteroid, launched by one of the battlecruisers, cast an eerie light over the scene. Thomas allowed himself a moment of relief. If the freighter had attempted to engage his team, the results would not have been pleasant.

"Down here," he ordered, as he led his team towards where the freighter had been docked. There was a hatch there set within the rock that resisted him when he tried to open it with an armoured hand. He chuckled as his lips quirked in wry amusement. That was against Imperial Law and carried a mandatory sentence of twenty years in prison. The rebels were guilty of yet another offence, one more serious than most. It hardly mattered. One of his team carried a set of explosive charges and used one of them to blow their way into the airlock. Somewhat to his surprise, no hail of fire greeted them as they forced their way into the asteroid.

"Deploy sensor bugs," he ordered, as he followed the first four into the asteroid. It was rather disappointing to his eyes. For all that the Security Officer had talked about the asteroid, warning them of the many dangers and temptations they would face once they forced their way into the rebel stronghold, it was depressingly normal. The inner airlock had an emergency forcefield to prevent the air from leaking out, although no one dared take off their helmets. Selective depressurising of compartments was a neat way to get rid of unwanted guests. "Contact the ships and tell them to send the second wave down to join us."

He smiled as the images of the interior of the asteroid started to build up in his HUD. The sensor bugs could move far faster than any human and were completely invisible to the naked eye, although the rebels had access to Marine-issue systems that could probably pick them up without trouble. Sanctuary — and that, he considered, was a rather inappropriate name — was starting to take shape and form, plotting out the various passageways and compartments. As his team expanded and started to advance into the unknown, he found himself waiting patiently for the hammer to fall. The rebels wouldn't tamely accept their violation of their base, not when they'd had their chance to surrender and had refused it.

"The remaining ships are secure sir," his deputy said. The rebel ships had either tried to escape — whereupon they'd been picked off by the waiting battlecruisers — or had been bitterly defended. Their crews had finally been beaten and either killed or captured, with their boarders trying to get them away from the asteroid and into the waiting arms of the Imperial Navy. The technical staff could analyse their computers, do some number-crunching and hopefully find the location of more rebel bases. "We're on our way to join you."

"Have one of the ships moved to the main hatch and used to block it," Thomas ordered, calmly. The sensor bugs were finally picking up traces of real people, lying in wait. "Once that's done, have the other airlocks opened and start expanding the bridgehead. We need to press our advantage as quickly as possible."

* * *

Neil had finally had the chance to get into his armour — one of his Marines had brought it to him, before running back to join the defenders massing towards the spaceport — before the enemy troops had started to break their way into the asteroid. He'd been relieved the moment that he realised that the attackers, whoever they were, weren't Marines. It had lasted until he'd realised that whoever was in command was smarter than any Blackshirt commander he'd ever met. He'd taken a number of starship crewmen as prisoners *without* any of the atrocities that commonly followed in their wake.

"Move the 1st and 2nd platoons up to cover the entrance points," he ordered, calmly. "I want 3rd platoon to get up to the surface and start moving in on their rear."

"3rd reports that the enemy support is too close to the surface to risk contact," the CO of 3rd platoon said, through the Marine datanet. "We can risk it once the enemy craft have been drawn towards the spaceport."

Neil scowled. "Understood," he ordered. A Blackshirt commander would have ordered them to make the attack and to hell with how many good men were killed attempting to do the impossible. "Stand by for…"

"Sir," one of the operators said. "The starship crews are ready to fight!"

Neil swore. He'd known from the start that there was no way to protect the starships concealed within the spaceport and had ordered the crews to abandon their ships and make their way to safety. Instead, they'd ignored him and chosen to make their own stand… in the most fragile part of the asteroid! He opened his mouth to issue

new orders, to tell them to get the hell out of there, but it was too late. They were already in position and couldn't fall back without being seen.

"Damn them," he muttered. Could he help them? If he ordered the two platoons to advance… no, that would throw away his men and some of the trainees for nothing. They couldn't get into a pitched battle so close to the hull or all hell would break loose when the battlecruisers started firing directly into the asteroid to support their people. "Order the two platoons to hold position."

None of the operators objected, but he knew what they were thinking. He'd abandoned the starship crews, leaving them to die. And the hell of it, he knew, was that part of him felt the same way. The cold logic of war was sometimes not enough to warm his heart.

* * *

Jane Chaney braced herself as she crawled through the tube, holding her breath for as long as she could. The interior of the tube stank badly of oil and gas, as well as other stenches that entered the asteroid whenever a visiting starship opened its airlocks and started to air out its interior. For Jane, who had stowed away on a starship that had visited her very fundamentalist home asteroid back when she had been nine, it was the sweet smell of home. And her new home — after four years of working her passage on a dozen different starships — was under threat. There was no way she was going to allow the invaders to enter the asteroid unopposed.

She swore under her breath, using words the chief engineer on her first starship had taught her, as her developing breasts caught on the side of the tube. Jane, like many other children born on asteroid habitats, had matured slowly, even as she had developed mentally at a far greater rate than many other kids her age. She had even travelled disguised as a boy for most of the time, after learning that many spacers developed a flexible attitude to planet-bound rules of morality and whole new standards of beauty. Where once she had been able to squirm through the tightest of tubes without problems, her developing body was now betraying her, leaving her wondering if she was going to wind up caught in a tube she could once have traversed without a sound. After the fighting was done, she would have to give serious thought to her own future.

The sound of hard footsteps echoed from below her as she reached the hatch. At some point, back when the rebels had been building their habitat, they'd installed small tubes and connecting tunnels for some reason best known to their leaders. Jane suspected

that they'd designed them to move from place to place unseen — after all, it was what *she* used them for — even though most of them were too small for an adult. She rubbed her breast angrily as she peered down through the semi-transparent hatch. Most girls and all guys might speak in favour of breasts, but they were nothing apart from a pain to her. How the girls with really big breasts got along she didn't know.

"Ok, you bastards," she muttered, as she saw the black suits of armour making their way down the corridor. It didn't seem to have occurred to them to look up, but then… in her experience, no one ever did. It was how she had hidden from a lecherous second officer on her fifth freighter, a second officer who had been surprised and horrified to discover her real sex. The idiot had thought that she was a boy! "I've got you now."

She pulled back the hatch and dropped the bag she'd been carrying down on top of the armour suits, before running as fast as she could. The explosion still sent her sprawling to the deck, gasping in pain as she banged her exposed elbows against the metal. There was no way to tell how many she'd killed, or even if she'd killed any of them, but… before she could react, a bolt of blue-white light punched its way through the deck far too close to her for comfort. She was scurrying away when a second pulse slammed into the deck and it weakened, tilting madly as overstressed metal started to give way. Jane realised, as the stench of ionised air reached her nostrils, that the Blackshirts had been firing madly into the overhead section. A final bolt of blue light struck her legs and she screamed in pain — all reserve gone — as she fell through the metal and down in front of them.

The pain was overwhelming, worse than her father trying to beat some sense into her, worse than the pain and humiliation she'd felt when she'd shocked herself while rewiring a module on her second starship. Massive black figures gathered around them, staring down at her, their features invisible behind their black helmets. She wanted to pull herself to her feet and die spitting defiance in their faces, yet she couldn't feel her legs. There was absolutely no feeling from the lower half of her body. She could barely move her head. It dawned on her, slowly, that she had to have been badly injured, yet surely she could escape?

One of the black figures lifted a rifle, pointed it at her head, and pulled the trigger. There was a flash of blue-white light… and then nothing.

* * *

Thomas watched the girl's head disintegrate, fighting down an urge to be sick. It had been a mercy killing; indeed, he had no idea how the girl had still been alive after a plasma blast had sheared off her legs and left the stumps cauterised. He'd seen many unpleasant sights in his career — one didn't reach high rank in the Blackshirts without seeing thousands of horrific sights — yet the poor girl had been among the worst. She would have died without the intervention of a proper medical team and even then it would have taken years for her to recover from the shock.

"Pretty girl," one of his team said. He didn't sound disappointed or angry, despite losing his first chance at one of the perks of serving in the Blackshirts. Thomas, who liked to think of himself as more civilised than most of the other Blackshirts, would have relieved his feelings by bawling the younger man out. "What do we do now?"

Thomas looked back at the blackened shells that were all that remained of two of his men. Both of them had been caught in the blast the girl had caused, just before she'd been killed. It wasn't a good exchange rate, even if they were all expendable.

"We keep moving," he said. He sent a series of commands to the sensor bugs. They would expand their probes into the tunnel network that had been exposed by the girl, allowing them some advance warning of any more solo attacks. The dead girl, he suspected, might have operated on her own, but she'd certainly shown the enemy how to delay them. If they could use the tunnels to outflank them, the rebels could whittle away at his force until nowhere was safe. "There are more enemy fighters waiting for us up ahead."

He concentrated on splitting up his forces. If the spaceport could be taken relatively intact, his reinforcements could be flown right into the asteroid, allowing him to push out faster and further. He doubted that the rebels would be surprised — they'd have to expect that much — but they'd be unable to react quickly.

"Onwards," he ordered, and smiled. If he won, and if he survived, the sky would be the limit. "Prepare to attack."

* * *

The starship crews didn't go down easily. They'd built up a formidable position and backed it up with the weapons mounted on their ships. Neil watched in numb fascination as they threw back three attacks before the fourth one broke through, leaving three ships as flaming wreckage and pushing the defenders back. One of the battlecruisers had moved closer and started to open fire, picking off several of the defenders even through the forcefield covering the

entrance to the spaceport. The massive hatch hadn't stood up to its weapons for more than a few seconds. After that, the defenders were doomed.

"They're pushing their way into the remaining starships," one of the operators reported. The Blackshirts had continued to advance, despite their heavy losses. Sheer determination would make up for a lot of tactical flaws. And, for that matter, they definitely seemed more civilised than the ordinary run of Blackshirts. "One of the ships is planning to jump out."

Neil felt his eyes go wide with horror. "Tell them not to move," he ordered, knowing that the order would not be heeded. There was no other way for the crews to escape. "Tell them…"

"Too late," the operator said. "They're already powering up."

* * *

Thomas cursed as the light freighter rose into the air on an antigravity field, using the positions of the Blackshirts to shield itself from the *Vengeance's* fire. The battlecruiser couldn't shoot without bringing the remains of the freighter down on the Blackshirts. Even so, what else could the ship do? They were unable to bring their weapons to bear on the attackers, for they'd just be shot off without their shields and they couldn't use their shields in such a confirmed place. Unless…

He saw — too late — a shimmer forming around the prow of the freighter. Space itself seemed to warp and twist around it, the light from the fires suddenly refocused as mighty energies started to claw at the very fabric of space and time. He started to shout a warning as the flicker drive engaged, there was a brilliant flash of golden light and the starship vanished.

An instant later, the shockwave hit and the entire asteroid shook.

Chapter Forty-One

Thomas activated his suit's magnetic grapples as the gravity field twisted, sucking the assault force towards where the starship had been. Cries of horror and terror echoed over the assault band as some of the troopers, not so quick to react, were pulled towards the singularity along with everything in the spaceport that wasn't secured to the floor. The gravity field snapped off a microsecond later, leaving armoured troops and assorted debris flying through the air and down to the deck. Thomas winced as he saw a soldier crash to the ground and lie still. Even powered combat armour couldn't prevent its wearer from being stunned after such an impact.

"Sound off," he ordered. Luckily, the enemy was in as much disarray as his own men, or they could have mounted a counterattack and destroyed his force while they were scattered and stunned. He listened as the numbers counted and allowed himself a moment of relief when he realised that only a handful of his men were either gone or injured. "Form up and…"

The forcefield holding the air inside the asteroid collapsed and vanished, allowing the air in the spaceport to start streaming out into the vacuum. Thomas hadn't deactivated his grapples, thankfully, and he was able to withstand the sudden pull to the rear. A handful of soldiers were less lucky and were sucked out into space, although their suits would protect them long enough for them to be rescued by the battlecruisers and their shuttles. Thomas watched as a torrent of debris followed them into the vacuum, sweeping the bay clean. He'd once watched as a space habitat was carefully vented to exterminate a particularly nasty form of crawling insect that had somehow passed through the screening and made a home in the habitat and he knew that nothing would survive in the remains of the spaceport, unless it had a suit of its own. The sensor bug network had been disrupted by the starship and then by the sudden transition to vacuum, but it was already reporting that the Blackshirts were largely alone in the spaceport. A handful of rebel fighters had been in the tubes when the compartment depressurised and were apparently dead.

He waited until the spaceport had finished venting and then led his men over to the connecting tube, linking the spaceport to the remainder of the asteroid. Unsurprisingly, it was locked and secured, or the entire asteroid would have vented into space. The early asteroid developers had been paranoid when it came to safety, building in hundreds of cut-outs and automatic airlocks; the rebels, it seemed, had shared their paranoia. They would have to either cut through the hatch and walk right into the ambush he *knew* had to be there — the

rebels would never have a better chance to inflict huge losses on his men — or try to go out onto the surface of the asteroid and burn through somewhere else. If there were Marines out there, he knew, that would be suicide. It could not be risked.

"Start moving up the heavy weapons," he ordered. If he knew there were an ambush there — the sensor bugs couldn't seem to get through without disappearing, which was indicative in itself — he could at least spring it early. "Prepare to cut through the hatch."

He watched as two of his men manoeuvred a heavy laser cannon into position and prepared to fire. The bulky weapon was starship-grade, capable of cutting through even superdreadnaught-class armour if it had enough time to work with, and — unlike plasma cannons — it didn't explode violently if the enemy hit it. Even so, they lacked the flexibility of plasma cannons and other, more typical weapons, but it was just perfect for raiding an asteroid.

"Fire," he ordered.

* * *

"We're in position, boss," Corporal Joe Hughes informed him. "Don't worry about a thing."

Neil snorted. The starship's disappearance had sent shockwaves through the entire asteroid. The status display — what little there was of it, for the rebels had never bothered to install a full internal sensor network — was covered with red lights, warning of damage to the internal systems and possible structural damage. It was a damn good thing, he told himself, that they hadn't been spinning the asteroid for gravity or the entire habitat would have started to come apart. Even so, the cascade of systems failures and alert messages suggested that it might be a good time to start thinking about evacuating the asteroid — if there was anywhere to go. The looming presence of nine Imperial Navy battlecruisers blocked all hope of escape.

And the cameras in the spaceport, the one place where they'd had near-complete coverage, had been knocked out. He wasn't sure if the Blackshirts had been shooting them or if the shockwave had disabled them, but it didn't matter. There was no way to know, now, what was going on inside enemy-held territory. They might be planning to cut through into the main asteroid by now, or they might all be dead. There was little data on what happened to anyone unlucky enough to be caught near a starship flickering out, yet some of the data suggested that they would all be dead. A younger officer might have been tempted to open the hatch and find out, but Neil knew better. They couldn't be that lucky.

“Good,” he said, knowing that ten Marines in powered combat armour were better than a hundred Blackshirts, even if the Blackshirts were wearing armour too. It helped that the enemy had no choice, but to come directly at his men. The asteroid’s internal structure would see to that, unless they wanted to risk digging elsewhere with rock-cutters. Truthfully, Neil was worried about that possibility, more worried than he cared to admit. The Blackshirts didn’t have to care about the asteroid being depressurised and everyone onboard suffocating to death. “You have tactical command. Make a mess.”

He checked the other sensor and nodded to himself. Almost all of the women and children in the asteroid had been moved to the inner core, wearing spacesuits to protect them against a sudden change in pressure. Part of him questioned the value of such precautions — the only people who could pluck them out of space were the Imperial Navy — but it wasn’t in him to give up. Who knew — if they held out long enough, the superdreadnaughts might return. Or, perhaps, the Imperial Navy had its own superdreadnaughts lucking nearby, just hoping that Admiral Walker would stick his head into the noose.

“Don’t worry,” Hester said, in her whispery voice. Neil was privately impressed. Very few Marines could have gone through everything she’d endured and remained sane. “We will hold out long enough and if we die, we will take them with us. We will die for our cause”

“I’d much rather make them die for our cause,” Neil said, practically. Hester laughed. It was a vaguely unpleasant sound through her damaged face. “I wonder if they have any idea what they’re getting into.”

He scowled. Hester had taken him aside briefly and explained about the demolition charge they’d built into the asteroid. An extremely-powerful nuclear warhead, normally used for cracking asteroids into smaller pieces, had been hidden within Sanctuary. If the asteroid fell, the weapon would be detonated, killing everyone onboard and throwing tons of rocky debris towards the Imperial Navy starships. Neil doubted that it would cause any real damage — the battlecruisers had point defence weapons, designed to handle missiles that moved far faster than the pieces of rock — but it would certainly cheat the Imperials in the moment of their victory.

And yet, it wouldn’t be a real victory, not for him.

He shook his head. It hardly mattered. Either they held out long enough or they didn’t. The rest was in God’s hands.

* * *

The hatch was glowing red now, great streams of molten metal flowing off it and pooling on the deck. The laser cannon was being moved now as the operators felt out the weak spots in the hatch, cutting through slowly, but efficiently. The rebels had created a neat hatch, one that couldn't be simply blown open by explosives, yet it couldn't stand up to a laser cannon. Thomas made a silent bet with himself — some of his men were making overt bets over the communications channel — as to how long it could stand up to the laser. A hiss answered his question as air started to leak through from the other side. The hatch slowly folded over and started to collapse.

He ducked sharply as a hail of fire blasted through from the other side. The defenders didn't seem to be bothered by the sudden loss of air pressure in their compartment, although the Blackshirts had rigged up another forcefield to prevent the air from flowing out into vacuum. Even so, the air pressure was going to drop alarmingly until it equalised, a painful experience for anyone not in a suit. Two of his men were struck by plasma bolts and killed outright, a third was badly injured and had to be pulled back to one of the shuttles. At least he, unlike the crippled rebel girl, would have a fair chance of survival. His suit had already sealed the wound and injected sedatives into his bloodstream.

"Load grenades," he ordered. The sheer volley of fire suggested that the rebels had either placed an entire team of men just past the hatch or that they'd set up a pair of plasma cannons and set them to fire automatically on everything that moved. "Hit them!"

The armoured combat suits carried their own grenade launchers, allowing their users to select and fire one of five kinds of grenade. Thomas selected high explosive — there was no point in playing around with stun grenades when the enemy was certainly armoured too — and fired them through the remains of the hatch. The enemy fire followed his grenades, shooting them before they could detonate, but his men were firing too. It only took one…

He cursed as there was a brilliant flash of white light and the deck shook. There *had* been a single plasma cannon — or perhaps more — there and, now that its containment had been broken, it had released all of its plasma in a single burst. The results… the results had been unpleasant. Great rivers of white fire seemed to flow everywhere, melting great gashes into the deck and bulkheads, even the ones made of stone. Alerts flickered up in his HUD, warning him that the atmosphere was poisoned and to keep his helmet on at all times. If the enemy had actual men operating the plasma cannons, nothing, not even the most advanced combat armour in the entire Empire, could have saved their lives.

"Team One," he ordered. "You are cleared to advance."

* * *

Molly McGhee felt herself shivering as the billowing cloud of white fire started to fade away. She hadn't understood why their Marine instructors had insisted on setting up their positions some distance from the cannons, not until one of the cannons had exploded, setting off the other two. If the Marines and their trainees had been any closer, they would have been caught and fried in the blast, allowing the enemy to advance without opposition. She took a firmer grip on her rifle and started to pray under her breath. It was the first time she had been in a real fight and despite herself she felt nothing, but terror. The enemy was closing in.

Years ago, back when she had been a girl of seven years old, her parents had owned a starship and worked as independent traders. That had ended when the Empire-backed shipping lines had extended their reach into their home sector, using a mixture of legal and illegal tricks to force the independent shippers out of business. After a pirate attack had narrowly been averted by her father's quick thinking, the family had taken their ship and migrated into the Beyond, hoping to find a safer life. It hadn't worked out as well as they had hoped and, after her parents were killed by the Imperial Navy, Molly had gravitated to one of the many rebel organisations within the Beyond. They had fought the Empire — or claimed to have done; Molly had never been part of any offensive operation — and yet they had no real hope, not until Admiral Walker had arrived with a fleet of superdreadnaughts and started pulling the various rebel groups together. Molly admired Hester Hyman and her efforts, but she looked up to Admiral Walker. He'd given the rebellion real hope. She would have died for him.

A black shape appeared through the smog, a man wearing powered combat armour. Her own armour informed her that he wasn't broadcasting a friendly IFF, which meant nothing when *she* wasn't broadcasting either. She had been surprised when their instructors had told them not to use them without permission, but she'd understood when he'd explained that they might as well draw a targeting circle on their suits and invite the enemy to open fire. The fact that the newcomer *was* transmitting an IFF signal was a sure sign that he was an enemy soldier. Molly felt hatred rising within his breast as she took aim. They had been told not to fire without specific orders, but there was no reason she couldn't prepare as another black figure joined the first, followed by a third and a fourth. The Marines had assured her that they should be almost impossible to detect, even with the naked eye, hidden as they were, yet she knew better than to trust such assurances completely.

“Stand by,” her commander ordered, quietly. The defenders had used light cables to link themselves together, a neat low-tech solution to the problem of avoiding calling in enemy fire on their position. The Marine-issue armoured suits included transmitters that were effectively undetectable, but the same couldn’t said of the more basic suits issued to the new recruits. “On my command, open fire.”

Molly found herself thinking, suddenly, of her parents. Her mother and father had never been anything less than loving, even when her older brother had nearly deactivated the life support and come far too close to killing them all. She missed them dreadfully. She missed her first boyfriend, who had gone out on a mission and never returned, and even her second boyfriend, who had cheated on her with another man. The bastard had been a good kisser, but he just couldn’t keep it in his pants. Being cheated on with another man had put her off men for a few years, before she had picked up a third boyfriend from among the Marines. He was off with Admiral Walker, probably speeding back to the rescue right now — at least, she hoped he was. It would be just like him to come riding over the horizon when all hope was lost.

She pinched herself and focused on the black shapes. The Blackshirts were advancing carefully, one group moving up the corridor, another heading down it. There seemed to be no limit to their numbers; they just kept flowing in, at least twenty by her count. They were deploying sensor bugs as well, according to her suit, but the Marine countermeasures were keeping them under control. It was just as well. If they spotted the ambush before it was too late… she noted, suddenly, that they were keeping an eye on the ceiling and wondered why. There were no hidden passages above them in the rock. The whole idea had been to limit the number of connections between the spaceport and the remainder of Sanctuary.

“Take aim,” her commander ordered. They had to aim manually. Any targeting aid, such as a ranging laser, would be detected when it touched the enemy suits. “Open fire!”

Molly pulled the trigger and her rifle spat a stream of plasma pulses down towards the Blackshirts who staggered under the sheer weight of fire. A handful fell, their suits burned through by the incoming fire, but others hit the deck under their own power, bringing up their own weapons and returning fire. Plasma bolts began to sizzle through the air towards them, striking the armour plating the defenders had put into place to give them some cover, a handful finding their targets and burning through their suits. Molly heard one of her oldest friends cry out seconds before her icon vanished from the HUD. A plasma bolt had struck her in the throat.

“Fall back,” her commander snapped. Molly took a final shot and

then turned, keeping her head down as she had been ordered. Others were crawling rapidly towards the next strongpoint, briefly triggering their IFF signals to ensure that they weren't fired upon by the automated defences. An explosion shook the deck behind her as the enemy resorted to more grenades and heavier weapons to clear their path, leaving her scurrying as fast as she could. Her commander kept ordering them to move faster, even though they were all moving quickly. The sound of firing was growing louder. "Get into the next position and prepare to continue firing!"

Molly nodded as she grasped her rifle and sat up, climbing back into firing position. There were only a limited number of strongpoints before the invaders broke through into the asteroid proper, allowing them to spread out and secure the vital infrastructure. They had to stop them before then, or the asteroid was doomed. There were plans to carry on fighting, even when the invaders got inside, yet… somehow, she was sure that they wouldn't work.

"Come on, Bobby," she muttered, as she fired on a Blackshirt and had the satisfaction of seeing him collapse under her fire. Her current boyfriend had to come to their rescue, right? It couldn't end like this. "We need you…"

The Blackshirt advance continued, undeterred by the resistance. Molly fell back again, and again, knowing that it was growing increasingly futile. Soon, far too soon, they would run out of places to fall back to.

And then they would die.

Chapter Forty-Two

"Keep monitoring them," Cordova ordered. The next flight of troop shuttles was already leaving the battlecruisers, heading into Sanctuary. "Send the update to the command team."

Hannelore looked up from where she had been sitting, hugging herself. All of the post-sex bliss had faded away, leaving her numb with horror and dismay. Cordova had ordered the crew to establish an undetectable laser link with Sanctuary, yet there was nothing else that he could do, but watch — and record the transmissions coming out of the asteroid. He'd told her that they could be used for propaganda, as another example of the Empire's beastliness, but it was no consolation. She was watching the death of a dream.

She wanted to cry. It was an effort to keep her voice level. "Is there nothing we can do?"

"Nothing," Cordova said. He sounded calm, yet she could detect his own anger and frustration underlying his voice. "Unless the superdreadnaughts get back in time to intervene, we can do nothing, but watch."

* * *

Neil scowled down at his display as another section vanished, as surely as if the invaders had somehow deleted it completely. The Blackshirts were knocking out sensors as they advanced, flowing out into the innermost core of the asteroid. It was lucky that Sanctuary wasn't a typical asteroid, but in some ways it hardly mattered. There were fewer fixed defences deeper within the asteroid. The Blackshirts — he hoped — didn't know it, yet they'd broken through the main defences. It was all down to improvised defences and tactics now.

"Keep updating Captain Cordova," he ordered. He'd come up with a plan to get Hester, at least, off the asteroid and over to the *Random Numbers* before it was too late, but she'd refused to abandon Sanctuary. Neil would have argued, yet she'd explained that if she ran — and left the defenders fighting till the last — her reputation would be forever destroyed. The Rim ran more on personal prestige than proper chains of command and no one would ever follow her again. Her second-in-command, who hadn't been anywhere near Sanctuary, would be undiminished by the disaster and would be able to take over the rebel group and carry on the war. "Pull the defenders back from Sector 45-67; they're about to be outflanked."

He shook his head. The invaders were about to burst into the market, where a team of defenders waited for them. It was going to be a very unpleasant encounter.

* * *

Thomas watched as another explosion shattered the rebel position, allowing the Blackshirts to move forward to their next target. He'd decided — after the second encounter with a rebel strongpoint — to bring up an HVM launcher and use it against the rebel positions. HVMs were supposed to be reserved for shooting down aircraft and armoured vehicles — it was easy for a person in an armoured combat suit to evade them — but they also made short work of the rebel positions. For the last five minutes, his team had been exchanging shots with a group of Marines, who kept popping up, firing a few bursts and then falling back before they could be engaged. The tactics were the tactics of delay, yet they were working alarmingly well.

He smiled, sourly, as new data popped up inside his HUD. Standard asteroid design — and there was no sign that the rebels disagreed — was to limit the number of connections between the spaceport and the asteroid proper. The expanding map of the asteroid suggested that they'd definitely found their way into the core of the asteroid, where people lived and worked and plotted rebellion. The sensor bugs were still encountering jamming, yet they were starting to overcome it as they penetrated further into the asteroid. There were entire sections that had no jamming at all.

The hatch ahead of them disintegrated, throwing chunks of metal towards his men, who ducked. This time, there was no hail of fire from pre-prepared positions, leaving him to wonder if they'd killed all of the defenders. No, he told himself; that wasn't likely. The population had to know that they'd be for the chop once the Empire captured them, something that would encourage them to keep fighting. The real question was why had they only faced such limited resistance?

His lips quirked humourlessly as the first team advanced forward, through the hatch. The Blackshirts had lost over ninety armoured soldiers, with another thirty too badly injured to be allowed to remain in the assault. It hadn't been a light struggle at all, not even slightly. And he was considering it mild!

"Stay alert," he ordered, as the team advanced into a massive chamber, the largest they had yet seen. The sensor bugs were unable to penetrate far into its vastness. "I want everyone to be very careful."

* * *

Molly wanted to scratch as she crouched behind a clothes stall in the market, hoping that her armoured form was invisible to anyone with bad intentions. A day ago, she would have allowed herself an hour or two to pick her way through the clothes in front of her, perhaps picking a handful to purchase and take back to her sleeping quarters. Now… all she cared about was how much cover they could give her against plasma bursts and the honest answer was not much. She giggled, despite herself, as she caught sight of her teammate. His armour was covered with ladies underwear.

The market had been evacuated along with most of the other public spaces, leaving the deserted chamber with an oddly sinister air. The stallholders had complained loudly about having to leave their wares in place — as if anyone was going to have the time to steal it with the Blackshirts bearing down on them — and had been reluctant to leave, but the Marines hadn't listened to arguments. The only sound in the chamber was the noise from the pet stall, where a dozen parrots and a handful of dogs were competing to see who could make the most noise. Molly wasn't sure if the Blackshirts would be frightened by the eerie sounds, but they sure as hell sent a shiver down her spine.

She winced as the hatch exploded outwards, hopefully catching a few of the enemy in the blast. Their demolitions expert had rigged it to explode, noting that it might catch a few of the enemy, but that it would also lure the Blackshirts into entering the market the right way. He'd claimed that they wouldn't go looking for the other entrances if there was one right in front of them. Molly wasn't sure if she believed him, but her commander had clearly decided to gamble. He'd ordered him to rig the explosives and then fall back to where he could lay more traps in their path.

Molly looked up as the first Blackshirt entered the chamber, weapon at the ready. A handful of others followed him, clearly nervous and twitchy. The dogs started barking again and the Blackshirts swung around, unleashing a hail of plasma bolts towards the pet stall. The stall exploded, killing most of the animals, although a handful of parrots flew up high and rained down verbal abuse on the Blackshirts. The Blackshirts started to fire on them before their commander, who clearly had a leveller head than most of his men, ordered them to hold fire.

"Fire," Molly's commander ordered. If they'd planned the distraction, they could hardly have done better. "Hit the bastards!"

She popped up and opened fire, along with the rest of her team. The Blackshirt position seemed to disintegrate as five of them were gunned down instantly, followed rapidly by two more as they turned

and started to run out of the chamber. An HVM was fired into the chamber, but without a solid target it flew over their heads and detonated against the far wall, leaving an unpleasant scorch mark on a mural the asteroid's children had created, a week after the asteroid had been declared habitable. She flinched back as the first grenade was thrown into the chamber, only to land some distance from their position. The Blackshirts were clearly disorientated, but that wouldn't last.

Molly flinched back as a hail of fire came back at them from outside the chamber. There were hardly any real defences in the compartment and the stalls either exploded or caught fire quickly. Her own stall caught fire, sending flaming clothes everywhere. She jumped back, firing as she moved, only to be struck by another burst of plasma in the leg. Plain flared through her as she collapsed to the ground, despite the best efforts of her suit. The position was falling apart and no one had time to help her.

"Go," she shouted, at a young man who had started to drag her away. The Blackshirts would be on them before they got more than a few meters towards the hatch. "Get out of here!"

He dropped her and ran. Molly felt dazed, the effect — she realised — of a sedative working its way through her body. Her suit was trying to save her, even though there was no hope of either safety or liberty. She heard the sound of running feet and realised, dully, that she was surrounded by Blackshirts. She pulled her hand out of the armoured glove and flipped up a hidden compartment within her arm. They had all been told that it was there, yet she had never dared even consider touching it before. Arms pulled at her helmet, disconnecting it from the suit and exposing her bare head to their gaze.

Molly saw five men in dark armour staring down at her. She knew what happened to women who were captured by the Blackshirts, even some men if they were unlucky. The Blackshirts were carefully conditioned to encourage them to commit the most awful of acts on a whim. They would pull her out of her suit and… it might have been the drugs, but she had never felt so calm in her life. Her finger caressed the switch, the suicide button, as she wondered if there was enough explosive in the suit to take them all with her.

"Fuck you," she said, and pushed the button. Her world exploded around her.

* * *

"The bitch committed suicide!"

Thomas smiled at the indignation in the corporal's voice. "Never

mind," he said, wryly. "There will be other women later."

He grinned as he forwarded new orders to the assault party. Slowly, but steadily, the entire asteroid was opening up in front of them. It wouldn't be long now.

* * *

"It won't be long now," Neil said, to Hester. His Marines were falling back as the Blackshirts advanced, using their numbers to make up for what they lacked in tactical flexibility. It was growing harder to command his forces as the Blackshirt jamming hacked away at his control systems. "They're nearly here."

"We can hold this place long enough to detonate the bomb," Hester said, in her hissing voice. The latest report from the *Random Numbers* showed yet another flight of assault shuttles landing at the spaceport, carrying another unit of Blackshirts into the fray. There had to be thousands on the asteroid now. "There may still be hope."

Neil looked at her and shook his head. "We can't hold out much longer," he said. Sanctuary wasn't designed like a typical asteroid, which meant that the Blackshirts would have to work at finding the command centre. It wouldn't take them as long as Hester seemed to think. The process of elimination alone would cut entire swathes of the asteroid out of their calculations. "I think we'd better get ready."

Hester smiled a strange smile. It looked odd when half of her face was badly scarred. "Maybe," she said. "If they come close to the command centre, Neil, we will begin the detonation sequence."

* * *

"The rebels are retreating into their inner core," the coordination officer said. He was currently linked into the Blackshirt command system, listening to the orders the Blackshirt commander was issuing to his men. "We're winning."

Angelika smiled to herself. A few more hours and the asteroid would be hers. Once her people controlled it, the prisoners would be transported onto her ships and secured, while an elite team from Imperial Intelligence searched the remains of the asteroid thoroughly. The Blackshirts were already taking prisoners as the defenders collapsed, sending them back to the rear in chains. Her fingers keyed her console and she brought up an image of seven rebels, chained to their seats, being transported to her ships. They wouldn't be able to do anything, even kill themselves, before her interrogators had sucked

their minds dry.

"Good," she said. With the fighting having moved into the heart of the asteroid, she'd pulled her battlecruisers back, just in case the superdreadnaughts decided to return. She'd feared running into them, but the odds were that they were off causing havoc somewhere else. That was bad news for whoever they hit — Admiral Percival would be looking for more scapegoats — yet they'd lost their base and much of their support in the Beyond. How long would the rebellion be able to go on without their base? "Have the prisoners transported to the interrogation cubes at once."

A new alarm flashed up on her console. "Captain, we have nine contacts, superdreadnaught-sized," her tactical officer said. Angelika felt her blood run cold. Was she going to be cheated of her victory by the rebel superdreadnaughts? "They're…"

He relaxed suddenly. "They're heavy freighters, Captain," he said, in relief. Angelika smiled, despite herself. That had been a close shave. She'd been within seconds of ordering an emergency flicker somewhere else, anywhere else. Even her contacts and patrons wouldn't have been able to save her once the post-battle analysis suggested that she'd fled from nine heavy freighters. Even if the rebels had loaded as many weapons and shields as they could into freighter hulls, they wouldn't be able to stand up to her ships. Heavy freighters — the design, she saw, was a common one throughout the Empire — moved through space like wallowing pigs. They were certainly as ugly as pigs. "I am picking up no IFF signals."

"Rebels," Angelika said, with heavy satisfaction. She was tempted to open fire and expunge her shame in their blood, but if she could take their computers intact, they might lead her to more rebel bases. The odds were good that Commander Walker had established a supply dump somewhere in the Beyond and if it could be located, his superdreadnaughts would run out of weapons and spares pretty soon. "Order them to surrender and prepare to be boarded."

"Aye, Admiral," the communications officer said. There was a long pause. "There's no response."

"They're trying to run," the tactical officer said. Angelika snorted. The rebel ships had come out of flicker at high speed and were trying desperately to cancel their speed and turn around before it took them right into her waiting arms. Even if they'd installed military-grade drives on those hulks, they would still be unable to turn around and escape before she caught them. "I think they're unable to dampen down their drive field without burning out the crystals and wrecking their drive nodes."

"Terrible," Angelika said, dryly. The rebel freighters were coming into range now, unable to evade her weapons. "Launch an assault

shuttle to each of those ships and board them. Take the crews prisoner and they can be interrogated along with the rebels."

"Aye, Captain," the tactical officer said. He paused. "Captain, I have some weird readings, I… *Jesus Christ*!"

Angelika stared in horror, unable to believe her eyes. The freighters had opened fire, not with the popguns normally issued to commercial ships, but with missiles — *thousands* of missiles. No superdreadnaught could have unleashed such a barrage, even with external racks; there were over *three thousand* missiles coming from each freighter. Twenty-seven thousand missiles were bearing down on her ships — nothing, maybe not even an entire fleet of superdreadnaughts could survive such an attack. Her point defence wouldn't even stop a handful of them before the rest broke through and destroyed her ships. Her great triumph had just collapsed in front of her.

Training reasserted itself. There was only one way out. "Jump out," she ordered. The flicker drive had been held idling, just in case the superdreadnaughts arrived and attempted to redress the balance. "Jump us out of here…"

"It's too late," the helmsman shouted. The drive was still powering up. There wasn't even enough power to make a random jump and hope they didn't arrive as billions of disconnected atoms. "It's too late…"

The tidal wave of missiles slammed into her ships and the entire battlecruiser squadron disintegrated. There were no survivors.

* * *

Neil somehow managed to gather himself long enough to close his jaw. He'd been a Marine for longer than he cared to remember and had seen far too many battles in space, yet he'd never seen anything like that, not even in drills. It had been centuries since the Empire had called together enough superdreadnaughts to launch so many missiles at once, but the launching ships were only freighters. How had they fitted so many missile launchers into the ships? And, coming to think of it, who was in command of the ships? Admiral Walker certainly hadn't told him about the possibility.

"We are being hailed," one of the operators said. Neil dragged himself back to reality. With their battlecruisers gone, the invaders could either surrender or die and he didn't care much which one they chose. He dispatched a string of orders to his Marines, ordering them to hold position and demand surrender. "The commander of the ships would like to speak with you."

“Put him through,” Neil ordered. If nothing else, they’d get some answers. “Who is it…?”

The display screen lit up, revealing a very familiar face. “Good afternoon, Major,” Daria said. Her face cracked into a brilliant smile. “I do hope I’m not late?”

Chapter Forty-Three

The party had started as soon as the remaining Blackshirts were rounded up, secured and stored in an old freighter until the rebel leadership could decide what to do with them. The inhabitants of the asteroid had spontaneously flowed into the main chamber and started celebrating their victory and their miraculous escape from death or capture. A line of stores had opened, selling food and drink at knock-down prices, while no less than three bands were providing music for dancing with more enthusiasm than skill. It seemed as if the entire remaining population of the asteroid was there, shouting and singing and indulging in a celebration that threatened to shake the asteroid to pieces. No one seemed to care any longer about the danger.

Hannelore gasped in delight as Cordova whirled her around the dance floor. She didn't know the steps — the dance was nothing like the formal dances she'd learned back at the High City — but it didn't seem to matter. Hardly anyone seemed to know the steps; the dancers were just whirling around, having fun. The music was of poor quality, part of her mind noted, yet who cared? She was enjoying being alive, as was everyone else. She looked up into Cordova's twinkling eyes and found herself laughing. They were alive!

She caught sight of Hester, watching from one side of the room with a dour expression, and felt a twinge of sympathy for the older woman. Hester's husband and children were long gone, thanks to the Empire, leaving her alone. Hannelore was tempted to try to urge her onto the dance floor, but she had a sense that it simply wouldn't work. Hester simply didn't have any room in her for love or fun any longer. How could she, when the Empire remained undefeated and might be dispatching something larger than a squadron of battlecruisers to the asteroid? Hannelore was rather surprised that Hester hadn't ordered the asteroid's immediate evacuation.

Cordova pulled her into a long line of dancers and passed her to another man, who took her, spun her around and passed her to a third man. This dance seemed to be more orderly, at least, even though half of the dancers were clearly learning as they went along. The man who was at the end took her arm, kissed her and then passed her back to Cordova, who winked at her when she looked shocked. Couples were pairing off all over the dance floor, partners disappearing to celebrate the joy of being alive in a different way, or even making out in public. She blushed when she saw a topless couple kissing and fondling right in the middle of the dance floor, something that she'd never seen back home, not even in the most decedent parties. Cordova noted her surprise and leaned close to whisper in her ear.

“They’re just enjoying themselves,” he said, just before he kissed her on the cheek. The music was slowing down now, becoming a romantic tune, and so he pulled her closer. “Tomorrow we must leave this place.”

Hannelore nodded, feeling a shadow falling over her mood. They might have survived one battle with the Imperial Navy, but they might not survive the next. She didn’t want to think about what might happen if they took her alive, for a simple gene-test would reveal who she was and where she came from. Her family — both of her families — would probably prefer to bury her and forget that she had ever existed, rather than admit that one of their children had gone wrong. She remembered a son, a heir to one of the grandest families, who had vanished under mysterious circumstances. No one knew for sure, but there had been rumours that his own father had strangled him in the night, purely for doing something so horrifying that even the Thousand Families would be shocked. Hannelore had some difficulty in imagining what that might have been, but not any longer. The young man might well have been linked to a rebel faction on Earth.

Cordova seemed to sense her feelings, for he gave her a final kiss and led her over to one of the side tables, which was groaning under the weight of food and drink. Hannelore was surprised that they’d brought out so much food — including foodstuffs that had to have been smuggled in from the Empire — but perhaps it made sense. If the asteroid was being abandoned, what they couldn’t carry would have to be abandoned, at least until the war was won. It seemed that scavengers would come and steal everything that wasn’t actually nailed down.

“Take this,” he said, passing her a glass of a strange red liquid. Hannelore sniffed it carefully, decided it smelled drinkable and took a sip. It left a river of fire burning down towards her stomach. “What do you make of that?”

“Strong,” Hannelore said, between coughs. She had never tasted anything like it before, even when pushing the limits of what was permitted even to one of her high station. “What is it?”

“The name is unpronounceable,” Cordova said, sadly. There was something in his voice, an emotion she couldn’t quite identify. “It comes from Xeno-VII, you see.”

Hannelore took a longer look at the glass and its contents. “You mean that this is an alien drink?”

“Yep,” Cordova said, with a sudden manic grin. “Don’t worry; it’s compatible with our biochemistries. The Crabs don’t consider it an intoxicant; they use it for cleaning their claws after mating, rather like we might go to the shower.” He chuckled, as one does at a joke that

isn't really funny. "We — the Rim — sell a few barrels of this each year to certain parties within the Empire and none of them have the slightest idea where it comes from or what its manufacturers use it for."

"Oh," Hannelore said. She found herself giggling as she took another sip. "Why don't you tell them? They'd have a collective heart attack."

The thought wasn't as funny as it seemed. The Empire would have reacted harshly against anything that reassembled alien chic, or humans adopting alien ways. There were so many different forms of family unit or social systems across the Empire that Hannelore wasn't sure why they felt the need to bother, but there was little logic in it. The Empire was built — its sole justification for existing — around defending humanity from aliens and alien influence. The Security Division would probably feel that anyone who drank — and enjoyed — alien-produced wines was a closet alien sympathiser, a traitor to humanity. The poor bastard would probably have wound up on a penal world.

"It's too good a joke to spoil," Cordova said. He looked up as a newcomer appeared beside them. "Hester; come and join the party."

Hester regarded the glass in his hand humourlessly. "I'll party when I am dead," she said, in her whispery voice. The scar on her face seemed to throb with agreement. "I want to know if you have completed the plans to evacuate the asteroid."

Hannelore wanted to protest, to claim that Cordova deserved at least one day off, but he gave her a restraining look. "I have sent for freighters from nearby systems," he said, calmly, as if he received ill-timed requests every day of the week. "Once they are here, we will begin loading them up and dispersing the population into the Beyond. Sadly, the crew of the *Jonnie-Come-Lately* devastated on the remaining ships, the ones that the Blackshirts didn't wreck. I hope that you will be putting them on the List."

Hester nodded. The Blackshirts had attempted to destroy every starship in the asteroid, but the escaping *Jonnie-Come-Lately* had damaged the entire spaceport when it had flickered out. Cordova had told her, afterwards, that it had damaged the entire asteroid — not just the spaceport — and the crew was likely to be declared outlaw throughout the Beyond. It wouldn't mean that they couldn't go anywhere — starships in the Beyond changed names regularly — but it would ensure that they wouldn't have any further involvement with the rebellion. She found it hard to blame him for being angry, even though she did worry about what an outlaw crew might tell the Empire. The damaged spaceport would make it harder to evacuate the asteroid.

“We may have to burn through the asteroid’s shell to get the people off, but we will do it,” Cordova continued, grimly. “I’ve already warned everyone to prepare for evacuation, with one bag per person unless they make their own arrangements with other starships. We can come back later for anything we leave behind, if the Empire doesn’t return in force.”

Hannelore looked up, alarmed. “Is there any way they could know what happened?”

“I doubt it,” Cordova said, “unless there was a cloaked starship lurking around and observing everything that happened. We didn’t detect anything of the sort, which doesn’t mean anything, but…”

He shrugged. “We won’t know for sure unless the Empire leaves us alone for longer than a week or two,” he added. “It will take any starship several days to get back to Camelot and report, and then another few days for them to dispatch a squadron of superdreadnaughts — longer, perhaps, if they don’t have one on hand.”

“I see,” Hannelore said. “If…”

Hester interrupted. “You know what we did to them,” she said, tartly. Hannelore gave her an offended look, but she ignored it. “Is there anything they could do with the knowledge?”

“Get ready to face the arsenal ships again,” Cordova said, dryly. “Give them enough time and they will come up with a few countermeasures or — more likely — design and build their own. It isn’t as though the arsenal ships are an invincible weapon.”

He smiled as the dance band struck up another tune. “There’s no such thing as an invincible weapon,” he said, as he put down his glass and reached for Hannelore’s hand. “No matter how impossible it seems, there are always countermeasures. I’m sure that some bright spark on the other side will think of one soon enough.”

Hester looked as if she had bitten into a lemon and sucked out the juice. Hannelore understood. The arsenal ships had demolished an entire battlecruiser squadron in seconds, promising a quick end to the war. If all it took to overthrow the Empire were a few converted freighters, perhaps she could just do it — and then relax, maybe finding a new husband and marrying again. Yet life wasn’t that simple and the war would go on for years.

Cordova pulled her onto the dance floor and whirled her into a crazy dance. “Don’t worry about it,” he said, his voice almost drowned out by the music. A pair of augmented Geeks of indeterminate gender danced past them, their implants whirring and clicking as they moved. “She wants us to win and everything else, even the little niceties, must be sacrificed to that.”

“I understand,” Hannelore said, as he put his arms around her and

held her close. She felt her own passion ignite, feeling the urge to celebrate their victory in the oldest possible way burning through her. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Cordova didn’t ask any questions. He merely allowed her to lead him back to the ship.

* * *

Thomas looked around the small compartment he’d been given — shoved into would be a more accurate way of putting it — in hopes of some small distraction. Boredom was something he had never gotten used to, even though his unit was expected to be more civilised than the regular Blackshirts. The rebels had given him a blank room with a table, two chairs and a single bunk. They’d also handcuffed his hands to the table, chained his legs to the floor and carefully removed or deactivated any hidden implants within his body. His lips quirked in bitter humour; anyone would think that they had reason to worry.

He hadn’t believed that the battlecruisers had been destroyed at first, not until he’d pulled the live feed from one of the drones and seen the expanding clouds of plasma where the battlecruisers had been. The rebels had demanded his surrender and, after making an attempt to save the lives of his men, he’d surrendered. He’d been promised that his men wouldn’t be killed outright, but nothing else, leaving him to wonder what the rebels had in mind. Very few Blackshirts survived falling into the hands of the enemy, if only because the enemy had plenty of grudges to pay off. Offhand, he couldn’t recall a single world that had been pleased to see the Blackshirts, although quite a few planetary leaders had called them in to provide armed support when they began unpopular steps like raising taxation.

The hatch — it was strong enough to keep him in even without the handcuffs — hissed open, revealing a man in Marine combat dress. Thomas lifted an eyebrow. He’d assumed that the rebels and traitors would have abandoned their uniforms once they abandoned the Empire, yet this one seemed to cling to his uniform, even in the face of someone who hadn’t abandoned his oath to the Empire. The Marine was older than him, his face marked by combat and regeneration treatments, yet there was something timeless about his expression. Despite himself, Thomas recognised a fellow soldier, a kindred soul.

“Just call me Neil,” the Marine said, by way of greeting. Thomas placed him as Colonel Neil Frandsen, one of the rebels from the original mutiny at Jackson’s Folly. “You and your men behaved remarkably well.”

“I do not allow drugged-up morons in my unit,” Thomas said, stiffly. Quite apart from any moral issue, a Blackshirt drugged up couldn’t be trusted in a spacesuit, let alone an armoured combat suit. “I was ordered to take the asteroid and its population intact, not slaughtered or mistreated.”

“So you were,” Frandsen agreed. “Why do you serve the Empire?”

Thomas blinked at the question. “The Empire has been good to me,” he said. It was true enough. “Even if it hadn’t been good to me, it has been good for the vast majority of the human race. Is that a good enough reason for you?”

Frandsen smiled, but it didn’t quite touch his eyes. “We’re attempting to reform the Empire, not destroy it,” he said. “Why not come and join us?”

“And what happens while we are busy reforming?” Thomas asked, slowly. “The aliens jump on us. The Empire keeps us united against their threat.”

“The aliens we know are no threat to us,” Frandsen said, flatly. “They have no military power, nothing they can use against us… a single starship could destroy any one of their worlds and there would be nothing they could do about it.”

“The last time we trusted aliens,” Thomas countered, “we were nearly exterminated as a race. And that wouldn’t have happened if we hadn’t been disunited, ready to weaken ourselves by fighting over who got to be in charge. We cannot risk that happening again.”

“And yet there is no proof of a threat from aliens in the Beyond,” Frandsen pointed out. “Or do you know something that was kept from the rest of us?”

Thomas flushed, and then realised that Frandsen was trying to get under his skin. He pushed his anger down and concentrated on the topic at hand. “I swore an oath to serve and protect the Empire for as long as I live,” he said. “I won’t deny that there is room for improvement, but maintaining the fundamental unity of the human race is far more important than allowing everyone to head off in a different direction. How long would it be before we started fighting each other? Your grand rebellion might succeed only to break up as you fought over who actually got to replace the Empire and take power.”

Frandsen smiled. “I understand your position,” he said. He sounded sad, yet there was something in his voice that worried Thomas. “I felt the same way myself once. I used to believe in the ideals of the Empire. And then… I was ordered to commit mass slaughter on behalf of the Empire. I refused.”

He looked up, his eyes meeting and holding Thomas’s eyes. “And one day you’re going to have to make the same choice yourself,” he

said. “What do you think would have happened to the people on this asteroid if you’d succeeded?”

Thomas shook his head. “Better to kill them, to kill everyone in the Beyond, than to wreck the Empire,” he said. He pushed as much pride as he could into his voice. “It remains the only thing holding the human race together and we need unity, or the aliens will destroy us.”

“You’re one of the Followers of Darwin,” Frandsen said.

Thomas shook his head. The Darwinists believed that all races were in permanent competition, one that could only end with one race destroying all the others. They had urged the extermination of every known alien race and at least one of their members had actually put theory into practice. They claimed it was an issue of the survival of the fittest. Thomas believed that they were purely racists, nothing more. As long as the aliens were controlled and knew their place, he had no objection to bringing them into the Empire.

“No,” he said. “I think…”

He broke off as Frandsen’s wristcom bleeped. “My commander has returned,” Frandsen said. He stood up. “If you won’t join us, your men will be transported to a place where they will be safe, at least until the end of the war. You may find yourself being tapped for messenger duty.”

Thomas watched him leave. As the hatch hissed closed behind the Marine, he shook his head. Frandsen talked a good game, he knew, but preserving the Empire was vital. It was all that kept humanity from tearing itself apart, weakening it to the point where the aliens could rise up and exterminate the human race. He rattled his chains mournfully and settled back in his chair, trying to find some comfort. God along knew how long they were going to leave him there.

Chapter Forty-Four

"So I brought the arsenal ships to Sanctuary," Daria concluded. She and the remainder of the rebel leadership had come onboard the *General Montgomery* at once, allowing Colin a chance to realise what had happened while he'd been retreating from Greenland. The rebellion had come uncomfortably close to total defeat. "Once we got there, we engaged them with maximum force."

"Expending a great many missiles in the process," Salgak said. The Geek seemed irked by the loss of so many missiles, even though losing the asteroid or the arsenal ships would have been far more worrying. "You used a great deal of overkill."

"There is no overkill," Daria said, firmly. She shot Mariko a wry glance. "There is only 'open fire' and 'reload.'"

"The fact remains," the Geek said, as his implants whirred in agitation, "that you fired off far more missiles than you needed to use."

Colin tapped the table. "It doesn't matter," he said. "It won us time to evacuate Sanctuary and move to a new base. Even if the Empire knows what happened here, it will take them time to react, so the first priority is moving and re-securing the contents of this base."

"It is already underway," Cordova assured him. "The population will be dispersed elsewhere."

"That leaves us all with a rather more worrying question," Anderson said, flatly. "How did they find the base in the first place?"

Colin had been wondering about that himself. The timing was a little odd, to say the least. If Imperial Intelligence had known about Sanctuary prior to his mutiny, he would have expected Percival to drop in a squadron of superdreadnaughts or two, just so he could catch Colin when he returned from a raid. It actually suggested that Percival had received new intelligence, but from where? Had someone sold him the location of Sanctuary and the target Colin intended to hit next, or was it just a ridiculous coincidence?

"Unknown as yet," Hester said. Her cold voice seemed calmer, somehow. "The logical solution is that someone sold us out to the Empire. Betrayal is a fact of life in the Beyond. I imagine that none of the prisoners would know who…"

"No," Anderson said. He had already requested permission to interrogate the prisoners, but none of the captured Blackshirts were senior enough to know the identity of the Empire's spies. Colin suspected that interrogating them was pointless, so they could be transported to the holding world until the end of the war, whoever won. "Imperial Intelligence would feel that no one had a need to

know, perhaps including the commander of the battlecruiser squadron. It could be anyone."

Colin shook his head. "It wasn't someone who knew about the secret shipyards," he said, "or the Empire would have targeted them first. Sanctuary is only important as a symbol of what we can do, not part of our supply line or future plans to build superdreadnaughts of our own. We know that some people can be trusted…"

"Not everyone knows about their existence, let alone their location," Hester said, in her whispery voice. "I do not know their location."

"What you don't know," Daria said, "you cannot be made to tell."

"I know the logic," Hester said, tartly. "I am merely pointing out that…"

Colin tapped the table again, harder this time. "That is very much a side issue at the moment," he said. "The problem we face is much worse. We were forced to retreat from Greenland and our ships are damaged, while the Empire will probably start gloating over its great victory. We need to move fast or our would-be allies will start wondering if we're going to lose."

He thought about the message they'd sent, bouncing from relay station to relay station, all over the Empire. How many would be inspired by it? How many would risk everything to mutiny against their commanders and join the rebellion? How many would die in futile battles as the Empire clamped down hard on any traces of insurgency or resistance? How could he let them down? The rebellion must not fail.

The display lit up at his command. "How many arsenal ships do we have on hand?"

"Three squadrons of nine ships each," Daria said. She didn't seem surprised by the question, but then, someone with her accomplished political skills would understand the need to strike back as soon as possible. "The ones I… expended are being reloaded now."

Colin nodded. He could see a handful of possible counters to the arsenal ships already… and even though Percival was an idiot, the commander he'd faced at Greenland was smart enough to think of the countermeasures for himself. They had to move as quickly as possible, if only because the Empire might well have sensor records of the arsenal ships in action. Once they got over their shock, they would evolve countermeasures. He reminded himself of that, time and time again. He didn't dare fall into the trap of regarding the arsenal ships as an invincible weapon.

"Good," he said. "In that case…"

He looked around the compartment, his gaze moving from face to face and judging commitment. "In that case," he repeated, "it is time

to go after Camelot itself."

The reaction was immediate. Cordova, Daria and Hester seemed to love the idea. Salgak, Anderson and the others seemed to think that Colin had lost his mind. He could understand their position — Camelot was the most heavily-defended world in the sector, after all — yet he didn't share it. Taking Camelot, and its facilities, more or less intact would ensure that the entire sector fell into his lap. Leaving Percival there ran the risk of all of his other gains and conquests being reversed. And besides, they needed a stunning victory and taking an Imperial Navy fleet base would give them just that. No one had taken an Imperial Navy base since the First Interstellar War.

"It won't be easy," Colin said, calmly. "We will be running a considerable risk."

"It isn't just a considerable risk," Salgak said. "It is an insane risk. In two years, we would be deploying our own squadrons of superdreadnaughts, backed up by our own improved cruisers and destroyers. We would be in a far stronger position to wage war on the Empire — and to recover from a defeat — once we have our own shipping yards producing new ships. We can wait. Time is on our side."

"Time is not on our side," Hester said, flatly. Her cold eyes blazed defiance. "The Empire was shocked by our rebellion, true, and we're a long way from Earth. The Core Worlds don't have any idea that something has gone badly wrong. How long until that changes? The competent leaders on Earth will dispatch other starships to this sector, including a commander who actually has more than two brain cells, and crush every budding insurgency in sight. If we do not move to capitalise on our success now, we risk having the Empire swamp us through superior resources."

She pressed her fingertips together, angrily. "We like to think that we can hide indefinitely in the Beyond," she said. Her scar seemed to be pulsing with the intensity of her feelings. "How long can we hide shipyards and starships? How can we build ships without emitting radiation that will attract them to us? Sure, we can *hide*, but how long for? The Empire will eventually track us down… while putting the occupied worlds into a lockdown that will make it impossible for any insurgency to develop. We have to move now!"

"And we also have to reassure the Popular Front," Daria added. "What it looks like, from the outside, is that we got our asses kicked at Greenland and our base in the Beyond has been exposed. The longer we leave it before we resume the offensive, the more rebels who will slip away from us, fearing that we have lost the urge to fight and win at all costs. Tell me something — in two years, will you still be arguing that we should wait, or will you pluck up the nerve to act?"

Colin frowned as the argument raged on. He wasn't sure if he trusted his own feelings. In the Imperial Navy, an Admiral who brought home a defeated fleet might face the wrath of his superiors, no matter how steeply the odds had been tipped against him. Colin's position, at least, was secure yet plunging headlong into Camelot might reverse that, if they lost. And, worse, there was his burning desire to avenge himself on Percival. Did he believe that hitting Camelot was a good idea for sound tactical reasons, or was it merely because he wanted to kill Percival personally? He asked himself the question, time and time again, but no answer appeared within his mind.

And then he remembered Jackson's Folly. There had been no word, as yet, about the planet, but Colin was sure that Percival would have reoccupied the system by now. The planet and its inhabitants would bear the brunt of his rage and fury; legally, he could do almost anything to them and no one back on Earth would care. The only thing protecting it from his wrath was the interests of the Roosevelt Family and *that* might not last. They might decide to cut their losses and urge him to scorch the world. And that would kill upwards of four billion humans. It could not be allowed. If the rebellion had to stand for something, if the rebellion wanted to reform the Empire, it had to stop such atrocities.

"I believe that we should vote on it," he said, finally. The argument had been on the verge of degenerating into a brawl. "All those in favour, raise your hands."

He counted as the votes were taken. "The ayes have it," he said, recalling old debates back at the Academy. "We will move against Camelot as soon as possible."

"And win," Daria added. "We have the firepower to take the planet now and then hold it against all comers."

Colin nodded, a battle plan already forming in his head. "We will repair the superdreadnaughts and then move," he ordered. "Officially, we will be preparing to return to Greenland and avenge our defeat there. No one outside this compartment is to know the actual target. Once the ships are ready, we will move at once and to hell with whatever dares to stand in our way."

He lifted his mug of Imperial Navy-issue coffee. "Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you a toast," he said. "Success to us and disaster to the enemy."

* * *

"They really did do some damage to this section," the Geek said,

as he stood with Colin near one of the damaged compartments. “They actually broke one of the armour plates and sent fragments flying into the ship. It was a good thing they didn’t manage to follow you through the flicker.”

“A very good thing,” Colin agreed, through gritted teeth. The Geek — he hadn’t given Colin any name, acting almost as if he were part of a hive mind — had a habit of pointing out the obvious. “Can you repair the damage in time?”

“Of course,” the Geek said, as if the question was somehow offensive. “We have *Fabricator* and we have most of the materials on hand. It is merely a question of producing a replacement armour plate and installing it on your ship. There are some minor improvements we could make to the hull, using experimental materials that we have discovered over the years, but I understand that you do not want anything new on your ship.”

Colin shook his head. One thing he had discovered about the Geeks was that they loved newness for the sake of newness. If he’d let them, they would have stripped out the tried and tested weapons the Empire had installed in *General Montgomery* and replaced them with their own designs. Colin had seen enough to know that some were very good designs and others had some serious flaws. They would all have to be tested carefully before he signed off on installing them within his starships.

Some of their other designs were far more reasonable for immediate deployment. Their ECM drones were far superior to the best the Empire could produce, offering Colin a handful of tactical advantages that would be denied to his opponents. While they hadn’t cracked the secret of faster-than-light transmission, they had managed to produce systems that compressed and extracted data at a far faster rate than the Empire, giving Colin a degree of tactical flexibility that the Empire wouldn’t be able to match. Their cloaking systems, too, were superior to the Empire’s, although they hadn’t completely eliminated the problem of turbulence caused by the passage of a cloaked starship. Indeed, Colin intended to exploit many of their inventions in his attack on Camelot.

“Just repair her to the original specifications,” he ordered. Whatever they produced in the future, he would have to fight the next battle with the weapons the Empire had designed and built. “What about the other starships?”

The Geek cocked his head, accessing their private band. It might as well be telepathy for it allowed direct mind-to-mind communication, something the Empire banned for reasons that escaped Colin. Or perhaps there was a very simple explanation; the mind techs used such systems for probing through a person’s mind

and they didn't want to share.

"They will all be ready for combat in two weeks," the Geek said. He smiled, a strange smile that took up the exposed part of his face. "And then you must win or die."

Colin nodded. "Of course," he said, dryly. "I knew the job was dangerous when I took it."

He walked back slowly towards the bridge, pausing long enough to look into sickbay and check up on the crewmen who were slowly recovering from their wounds. It wasn't a pleasant sight, yet he felt as if he had no choice, but to offer what support and comfort he could. The wounded, at least, seemed happy, even though they wouldn't be on the superdreadnaught when it flickered out to Camelot. Colin had already resolved not to take anyone along he didn't strictly need, even though both Hester and Daria had requested, then demanded, permission to accompany the fleet.

Two hours later, he stood in the shuttlebay and watched as the black-clad crewmen carried the caskets, one by one, into the launcher. The Imperial Navy's funeral service was time-honoured, laid down by the First Emperor himself, and even the Thousand Families respected it. Colin waited until the senior crew and a selection of crewmen — chosen from the friends of the diseased — had arrived, before he began to speak. It was his duty as the fleet's commander.

"We are gathered here today to say goodbye to our friends and comrades who were killed in action," he said. There were lines in the service extolling the dead as being devoted servants of the Empire, lines he'd decided to cut out, for speaking them would be a sick joke. "They gave their lives so that we could live. For our tomorrow, they gave their today."

He paused, feeling the weight of the squadron pressing down on him. A crewman had died when a shield generator had exploded too close to him, slamming his body hard against a bulkhead and rendering him a mass of blood and flesh. His coffin was closed and sealed. Another crewwoman had died when a burst of energy flared through the ship, vaporising her head and leaving the rest of her surprisingly intact. Her coffin, too, was sealed.

"They died upholding the values they believed in and we are diminished because of their deaths," he said. It was hard, so hard, to choose the right words. "We — we who have chosen to seek to reform the Empire — feel now that we have lost something truly important, people who believed in our cause and gave their all so that the cause could go on. In their name we will not fail, for to do so means that they have died in vain. Their names will be remembered forever as the ones who died in order that our dream might live."

He closed his eyes for a long second of silent meditation, as laid

down in regulations, and then nodded to the drummer. The drummer started to tap his instrument, a long slow beat that had never failed to send a chill down Colin's spine. At each high point, a casket was ejected into space, heading towards the local star. They would be lost within the vastness of space until they finally hit the star and vaporised. Very few Imperial Navy crewmen, even those who came from the Thousand Families, were ever buried in any other manner. Those who lived in space died in space.

"May they rest in peace," Colin concluded, once the final casket had been launched. The watchers echoed him. "They will not be forgotten."

* * *

Two weeks later, the superdreadnaughts were finally ready to move, accompanied by a small fleet of ships from the various rebel forces. The arsenal ships — the key to the operation — looked unremarkable compared to the other ships, but Colin hoped that that would keep the Empire from looking too closely at them. His other surprises should help with that, or so he hoped. Far too many devices had never been tested in combat.

"All ships, this is the Admiral," he said, as he took his command chair. He'd insisted on running through full tests before signing off on the repair work, but there had been no errors. The Geeks did good work, which was more than he could saw for many Imperial Navy shipyards. The contractors were often more interested in making money than in doing a good job. "Prepare to jump."

He settled back in his command chair. Whatever else happened, the die was about to be cast. Either they won, or they lost. There were no other options.

"Jump," he ordered.

Chapter Forty-Five

"Where is she?"

Penny watched as Percival strode around his quarters, repeating the same question time and time again. It had been nearly three weeks since they had expected to hear from the battlecruisers they'd dispatched to attack the rebel base, even if it was just a report of a deserted star system and a piece of misinformation that Imperial Intelligence had swallowed hook, line and sinker. Percival had gathered a powerful force for the execution of Operation Purge, yet he couldn't deploy the fleet into the Beyond until he knew for sure that the rebel leadership was in disarray and there were few prospects of a renewed offensive against the Empire.

"I'm sure she's on her way back now," Penny said, as soothingly as she could. The truth was that she was worried too, for the battlecruisers were dangerously overdue. Perhaps their commander had discovered the location of additional rebel bases and moved to attack them, or perhaps there was a simpler — and less pleasant — explanation. The battlecruisers had encountered the rebel superdreadnaughts and had been destroyed. "She is a reliable officer."

"Yes, she is, unlike some," Percival said tightly, scowling as he glared towards the sector display hovering in the centre of the compartment. His paranoia had grown to terrifying heights over the last few days. He'd started reshuffling his command staff, moving officers from one post to another, while combining his two superdreadnaught squadrons into one overwhelmingly powerful force. Using superdreadnaughts to deal with the average rebel ship was like using an atomic bomb to swat a single man, yet he seemed impervious to logic and reason. "No one can be trusted."

Penny held herself composed, despite the shiver that ran down her spine. How long would it take for Percival's paranoia to lead him to conclude that she was a threat, that she'd been conspiring with his rival… or perhaps, even, that she intended to lead the lower decks in a mutiny of her own. It would be suicidal, with so many Blackshirts on the command station, yet Percival might believe that she intended to try. His ranting about how the universe was conspiring against him, striving to deny him his rightful place, was growing ever more extreme. He had barely touched her in two weeks.

At one time, she would have been grateful, for even the merest touch of his hand left her feeling unclean, no matter how long she spent in the shower. Now… she couldn't help, but view it as an ominous development, a sign of his growing paranoia. If he had decided that he no longer wanted her, how long would it be before

she found herself exiled to a remote mining station, or simply killed outright? After all, Percival had dispatched Commander Walker to a remote patrol base and look how that had turned out.

"She'll be back," Penny said, as gently as she could. "Would you like a drink or perhaps even some other…?"

The alarm sounded before she could complete her sentence. It wasn't the standard alarm, but one warning of incoming enemy starships, one that had never been sounded outside of drills and exercises. Percival was on his feet at once, grabbing for the white beret that technically should only belong to the commander of a squadron of starships, and heading for the hatch. Penny followed him, surprised at his reaction, before realising that part of him had feared the worst. Commander Walker wouldn't die that easily. Poor Percival was tormented by nightmares of the monster he'd created, the one that could tear down the place he'd created for himself, even in death.

She followed him through the secured corridors — pausing long enough to nod to the Blackshirts and Household Troops on duty — and into the command centre. The staff were a little disorganised — Percival had broken up the working teams and reconfigured them, seemingly at random — but at least they knew what they were doing. A hundred red icons hovered in the main display, advancing towards Camelot. The rebels weren't even trying to hide.

"Status report," Percival ordered, as he took the command chair. He'd had it made especially for him and it reassembled a throne more than anything else. Penny considered it to be in very poor taste, particularly the carvings the artisan had worked into the metal. "What has the bastard brought to the party?"

The Duty Officer turned, unable to quite hide the flinch when he saw Percival. It wasn't too surprising. Over the last few weeks, Percival had been a looming presence in the background, even though he'd hardly spent any time in the command centre before then. After all, who would dare to attack Camelot? There were nine battle stations and hundreds of automated platforms covering the Imperial Navy's repair facilities… and that didn't even count the fleet Percival had been assembling for Operation Purge. The rebels might not have known it, but they'd jumped right into five-to-one odds.

Her lips twitched as she stood behind Percival. The rebels clearly made a habit of running tactical surveys on every system they attacked first — as doctrine suggested — and they would almost certainly know that Percival had additional ships and defences. Their attack, therefore, was suicidal unless they'd come up with something new, but what? It struck her, suddenly, that the battlecruisers might have run into something they couldn't handle, something new. The Empire feared the Geeks, feared them enough to order them executed

on sight rather than even trying to exploit what they'd developed, and Imperial Intelligence had insisted that the Geeks were part of the rebellion.

She looked down at Percival, read the subtle signs on his posture, and knew that there was no point in saying anything. Percival knew the odds — at least the conventional odds — and he was clinging to them, yet… she could see that he felt fear. He knew Commander Walker, knew him far better than Penny; he knew that his enemy was a tactical genius. In his head, she realised, Percival was already defeated.

"Admiral," the Duty Officer said. "There are nine superdreadnaughts, three battlecruisers, fifty-two cruisers of indeterminate class and a number of smaller ships, including a force of freighters. They're advancing on Commodore William's position as we speak."

Penny nodded. Commodore William wasn't known for being imaginative, but he *was* known as a safe pair of hands, someone who would never rise above command of a superdreadnaught squadron. Percival had granted him command of the forces assembled for Operation Purge because he would never seek to unseat his superior officer… unless, of course, that was an act. No one survived for years in the Imperial Navy without developing the remarkable skill of dissembling.

"Nine superdreadnaughts," Percival repeated. "They are all in full working order?"

"As far as we can determine," the Duty Officer said, carefully. Public Information's version of the Battle of Greenland had five rebel superdreadnaughts battered to the point of near-uselessness. Questioning the official version could have terminated a career. "We are too far away for effective scans."

"Order Commodore William to close with the enemy and destroy him," Percival ordered, settling back in his chair. Penny wondered, in a moment of insight, if Percival had started to believe his own propaganda. He no longer looked defeated. The Imperial Navy had sixteen superdreadnaughts and supporting ships; the rebels had only nine, including some which might be too badly damaged to operate at full capacity. "They are to be destroyed!"

* * *

"All ships have arrived in the system," the tactical officer said. "The enemy has detected our presence."

Colin nodded. That hadn't been unexpected. Camelot had the best

sensor network in the system and, really, he hadn't been trying to hide. He wanted Percival looking right at him. The main display was updating as the probes flared away from his ships, rocketing down towards the planet and the fleet forming up in a position to intercept his ships. The enemy didn't know it, but the live feed from the probes was far superior to anything they could develop for themselves. Colin could practically count the scars on some of the superdreadnaught hulls facing him.

He'd run through a dozen different possibilities for Camelot's defenders. In Percival's place, he would have kept his ships near the planet and combined their point defence with that of the fixed defences. Even with arsenal ships, that would have been a hard nut to crack… which was part of the reason he'd shown Percival his hand so blatantly. If Percival wanted a decisive victory, Colin would offer him one, before snatching it out of reach.

"Deploy the fleet into Formation Alpha," he ordered. Tension was running down his spine. What if there was something he had failed to take into account? What if he'd underestimated the opposition? The enemy commander he'd faced at Greenland had been smart, smart enough to be dangerous even without having a numerical advantage in superdreadnaughts. "Prepare to activate the drones."

"All drones are linked into the datanet system," the tactical officer confirmed. "They're ready to go."

Colin took a breath. It was important to appear calm and unworried — or so he'd been taught, back when he'd been a young and ruthlessly ambitious officer — even though they were sailing blithely towards certain destruction. He wondered what was going through Percival's head, or even if Percival had quietly decided to board a gunboat and command the defence from the nearest star system. It didn't matter. One way or another, the entire future of the Empire — if it would be reformed or if it would continue to decay until it collapsed from within — would be decided here.

"Open a channel," he ordered. The communications tech nodded. As they'd planned, the message would be broadcast in clear, allowing Percival's subordinates to hear it. "Admiral Percival, this is Admiral Walker, representing the Popular Front to Reform the Empire. You are ordered to stand down your ships and prepare to be boarded. Your time as commander of this sector is over."

Colin smiled before he continued. If he knew Percival, the message would both infuriate and terrify him.

* * *

"…Speak now to the men and women on the defences," the voice rolled on. "Ask yourself this; can the Empire long survive? Join us; join the one effort to reform the Empire, rather than breaking it up or…"

"Shut it off," Percival ordered, harshly. The voice vanished from the command centre. Penny wondered, absently, if he had realised that everyone in the system was hearing the message. There was no way to jam the emergency channel, even if doing it hadn't been a direct violation of Imperial Navy regulations. "Order Commodore William to continue his advance and engage the enemy."

Penny looked down at him. "Admiral," she said. "Do you not wish to make a response?"

"No," Percival snarled. His face had purpled alarmingly. "I will make my response in missile fire!"

Penny nodded, bitterly. The rebels had offered to allow Percival to go anywhere he wanted, even all the way back to the Core Worlds, but that would be a disaster for the Admiral. His patrons would desert him, he would get the blame for the disaster and he would finish his days on a penal world, if they didn't simply execute him for gross incompetence. The Roosevelt Family wouldn't breathe a word in his defence. Penny doubted that anyone would even try to defend him. They'd want to bury him as quickly as possible before turning their attention to crushing the rebels.

She shook her head slowly. Percival was caught between two fires. Only destroying the rebel fleet — perhaps not even that — could save him from nemesis. He couldn't even accept the rebel offer and hide somewhere in the Beyond.

To a man like Percival, being cut off from the Empire and its power structure would be a fate worse than death.

* * *

Colin sat back as he finished making his speech. He would have been astonished if Percival had surrendered, even after Colin had offered to guarantee his safety and free passage to anywhere he wanted to go in the Empire. Perhaps he didn't trust Colin to keep his word. Hell, *Colin* wasn't sure if he trusted himself to keep his word; having Percival in his hands would be a great temptation. He could draw his pistol and put a bullet through his head, or torture him to death, or even just crush his skull with his bare hands. The possibilities were endless.

He smiled and shook his head. They hadn't won the battle yet. He watched the display as the enemy fleet started to pick up the pace,

heading right towards Colin's fleet on a least-time course. The red spheres that marked weapons range were growing closer. So far, not even the Geeks had been able to devise missiles with longer ranges than standard-issue Imperial Navy designs, although they swore that they were working on it. Colin suspected that they wouldn't change the face of space warfare as much as might be expected, although they would make assaulting a planet easier.

Colin shifted in his chair as the timer ticked down towards zero. He was aware, on some deep primal level, of the hopes and fears of his entire fleet. The ones who had joined the mutiny, the rebels who had known their cause was hopeless and fought on anyway, the men and women he had rescued from the penal world… they all knew that this would be the moment when the rebellion became a true threat to the Empire, or was destroyed, shattered beyond repair. Colin had never been a gambler — he had regarded it as a poor habit, although he had sometimes taken money off Percival at the gaming tables — yet he knew that this was a gamble. It was easy, looking at the oncoming enemy fleet, to wonder if the naysayer factions had been right.

"Activate the drones," he ordered.

There were seventy-two drones deployed in a rough shell in front of the fleet, each one configured to present an image of a superdreadnaught to any passive sensors, or even active sensors at long range. The Geeks had invented them and Colin had tested them extensively against the best sensors his superdreadnaughts had, making sure that the Empire couldn't separate a drone from a real ship. It seemed that it required active sensors at very close range to penetrate the deception.

Percival would *know* that it was a deception, of course. Colin might have had a low opinion of his intelligence, but it wasn't *that* low. There was no way the rebels could have gotten their hands on seventy-two superdreadnaughts — eighty-one, counting the original ships — or Colin would have smashed Camelot and advanced on Earth, with very little in his way to stop him. But then, Colin had expected that too.

"All drones are active," the tactical officer said. "They'll be seeing them… about now."

* * *

"Admiral," the duty officer said, as the screen suddenly lit up with red icons. "We have new contacts… seventy-two additional superdreadnaughts!"

Percival's voice cut through the chaos. "It's a bluff," he said, savagely. Penny blinked at the sudden decisiveness in his voice. "That's how the bastard won at Khartoum."

All of a sudden, it made sense. Back when Percival had been a mere Commodore, desperate to prove himself and win the coveted promotion to Admiral, he'd used Commander Walker to win an exercise. Penny had studied the battle and had been impressed; Commander Walker had used drones to lure the enemy forces out of position, then hit them when they were least expecting it. It had been a tactical masterstroke and Percival, at least, had good cause to remember it. Except…

"Admiral," she said, slowly. "Wouldn't he expect it too?"

Percival turned his chair to look up at her. "What do you mean?"

"He can't have so many superdreadnaughts," Penny said. "We *know* he can't have so many superdreadnaughts, even if he had captured the entire sector fleet. So why is he playing a bluff he *knows* is going to be called?"

Percival said nothing, so she pressed her advantage. "Admiral, pull back the ships and combine their point defence with the battle stations," she said. "If it's a bluff, it won't hurt us and if it's covering for something…"

Percival slapped her, hard enough to send her rocking back on her heels. "He knows he's walked into a meatgrinder," Percival snarled. Penny barely heard him through the pain. He'd slapped her right in front of the entire command staff! He couldn't have made her position as the Admiral's Whore any clearer if he'd bent her over the tactical console and raped her from behind. "He's trying to bluff us to win time to recharge his drives and flicker out. You are dismissed from my service. You will report to your quarters and wait there for reassignment. I will deal with you once the battle is won."

Penny pulled herself to her feet, held herself ramrod straight, and strode out of the command centre, refusing to look at anyone or rub her face. Oddly, part of her felt relieved. Wherever Percival sent her, at least she wouldn't have to put up with his presence any longer.

And, as much as she hated to admit it, there was a good chance that the bastard might be right.

* * *

"They think they're calling our bluff," Colin said, with heavy satisfaction. Truthfully, it might not have made any difference if the Imperial Navy starships had started to retreat, but at least this way it prevented any possibility of having to fight both sections of the

defences at once. “Prepare to fire.”

He settled back into his chair as the datanet updated, with the arsenal ships in the lead. It had taken a great deal of careful planning to program the firing sequence, although Colin privately suspected that at least some of that effort had been wasted. The KISS principle had to be observed.

“Fire,” he ordered.

Chapter Forty-Six

Commodore William knew that few regarded him as an adroit tactician. In his fifty-two years in the Imperial Navy, he had made few mistakes… but he had no great successes either. His advancement had been fuelled by connections — his patrons were quite happy to deal with a man of limited ambition — and considerable seniority. He'd been a Commodore for over thirteen years and knew that there would probably be no further promotions in his career. On the other hand, command of a superdreadnaught squadron was a shining mark in a career file. Who knew where it would lead after he retired?

He couldn't disagree with Admiral Percival's assessment of the situation. If the rebels had hijacked superdreadnaughts from another part of the Empire, he would have heard something about it, if only whispers passed down through the grapevine. The superdreadnaughts he was advancing towards couldn't be real, even though they were the most advanced decoys he'd ever seen, which suggested that the remainder of the rebel fleet could be nothing more than drones too. If Commander Walker was actually trying to distract them while causing havoc elsewhere… well, at least *he* wouldn't look bad. After Stacy Roosevelt had lost an entire squadron of superdreadnaughts to mutineers, it was hard to imagine anything that would have made him look worse.

"Commodore," the tactical officer reported, "we are entering firing range."

"Good," Commodore William said. He wasn't used to commanding sixteen superdreadnaughts instead of nine, but his officers were used to him and he had managed to add the newcomers into the datanet without causing undue disruption. Percival had ordered him to open fire as soon as he entered range, yet Commodore William intended to wait and see if he could separate the drones from the real starships. It was alarmingly possible that the original nine superdreadnaughts, the first ones to be detected, were drones and the real superdreadnaughts had been concealing themselves… or perhaps he was just driving himself mad with paranoia. There was no way to know for sure. "Prepare to engage…"

The display went mad as alarms howled through the massive ship. *Thousands* of missiles were spewing out of the enemy fleet, roaring towards his fleet. The superdreadnaughts were *real*! They had to be real. Nothing else could have produced that level of firepower, nothing else could account for it. The rebels had somehow obtained an entire fleet and were deploying it to attack Camelot. His thoughts raced round and round in circles, unable to accept what he was

seeing. The rebels had done the impossible. They had assembled eighty-one superdreadnaughts with external racks and fired them in one massive volley.

He swallowed hard, cursing his own failure to order the drives powered up. He might have been able to escape, yet… that would only have meant disaster for him anyway. His career had just been destroyed, even with… it dawned on him that he wasn't dealing with the real problem, but there was no way to deal with it, or escape so many missiles. He could pick off two-thirds of them with his point defence and the remaining third would be enough to obliterate his fleet. Sixteen superdreadnaughts were about to die and it was his fault!

"Return fire," he ordered, hoarsely. It wasn't the commanding voice he'd been taught to use at the Academy, but no one could have remained steady in the teeth of so many missiles. The fire of sixteen superdreadnaughts, external racks or no external racks, couldn't hope to match the onrushing wave of destruction advancing towards him. Hell, the rebels should have had problems trying to coordinate that many missiles, yet somehow they were controlling them perfectly. "All point defence weapons are cleared to engage. I say again, all point defence weapons are clear to engage."

Sixteen superdreadnaughts carried a great deal of point defence and they were escorted by sixty-nine smaller ships, all linked into a datanet that hadn't been designed to handle so many incoming missiles at once. Its designers had assumed that there were limits to how many missiles could be deployed; never, in their worst nightmares, had they imagined a missile storm like the one advancing towards them. There were so many missiles that their emissions seemed to blur into one another, making it harder to even begin targeting them. Hundreds of missiles vanished as the point defence network struck them down, but thousands survived to make it through and hammer against his shields. Red icons flashed and vanished on his display as the smaller ships were vaporised — the rebels hadn't restricted their targeting to the superdreadnaughts alone — their shields and defences unable to stand up to the onslaught. His superdreadnaughts seemed to cling together — as if they could provide mutual support by moving closer — but it was already too late. A deluge of missiles fell upon them.

"Signal the rebels," Commodore William ordered. His career and the opinion of Admiral Percival no longer mattered. "Tell them we surrender!"

"It's too late," the tactical officer said. "They're entering terminal attack phase…"

The missiles slammed home. The superdreadnaught might have

shrugged off one missile or ten missiles or even a hundred missiles, but so many impacting so close together was beyond her ability to survive. As fireballs blazed out on her shields, the shield generators failed, allowing the rebels missiles to slam into the hull and start to explode *within* the hull. A series of tearing explosions blew the flagship into nothing more than expanding plasma. The remainder of the squadron followed it into death seconds later.

* * *

"My God," Colin breathed, as the final superdreadnaught vanished. No one had ever seen sixteen superdreadnaughts destroyed so rapidly, not even during the First Interstellar War. Since time out of mind, the tactics of space warfare had been determined by weight of fire and, now, the Geeks had introduced a whole new variable into the equation. The arsenal ships might be a one-shot weapon, they might not have the shielding or armour of superdreadnaughts, they might have the manoeuvring capability of a wallowing pig, but they had just changed the face of warfare. Every Academy graduate knew that if the first punch was heavy enough, there would be no need to throw a second.

He watched, as if from a far distance, as Commodore William's missiles roared into his fleet. The Commodore obviously hadn't been able to sort the real superdreadnaughts out from the decoys — or perhaps he just hadn't had time to update his command missiles with the new data. Of course, the sudden wave of missiles — far more than nine superdreadnaughts could launch — had been a very convincing argument. Colin rather regretted Commodore William's death, even if he had been on the wrong side. The aging naval officer had been a good and decent — if limited — man.

"Only a relative handful of missiles tracked our real ships," the tactical officer said. "The remainder went after the drones."

Colin nodded. One of the other great limiting factors in space warfare was that missile drives — while overpowered to a level no manned starship could survive — burned out quickly. Once the missiles realised their mistake, if they realised their mistake, they would have no time to seek another target before it was too late. The debris of the battlefield would have to be swept carefully, in case a stray missile hadn't been programmed to destroy itself once it lost power, but they were little threat to an alert starship.

The Empire wouldn't fall for the same trick twice, Colin knew, but for the moment it hardly mattered. Besides, if some of the other programs the Geeks had talked about became a reality, Colin would

never have to worry about running out of tricks.

"Open a channel," he ordered. He waited for the channel to open. "Admiral Percival, as you can see, my fleet is no bluff." And now, he knew, he *was* bluffing. The arsenal ships would have to withdraw, reload from the ammunition ships and return before he could launch a second massive salvo. And even then, he might not have enough to crack the defences of Camelot. "I have killed thousands of your loyalists in proving that I can destroy you."

He took a breath. "Surrender now and you will live," he added. He didn't want to make any promises, yet… did he have any choice? "If you continue to resist me, I will be forced to destroy Camelot and its orbiting facilities."

* * *

Penny had done something she knew was stupid, but she no longer gave a damn. Instead of obeying Percival's orders and going back to her quarters — which she barely used, as Percival had been fond of ordering her to sleep on the couch in his quarters — she had gone into the smaller back-up communications room and evicted the two officers on duty. They, at least, hadn't heard about her disgrace and relief — and if they saw the mark on her face, they said nothing. She had watched in disbelief and horror as sixteen superdreadnaughts were rapidly destroyed. The rebels hadn't been bluffing, yet…

She thought about it, tossing possibilities over and over in her head. They couldn't have captured so many superdreadnaughts without Percival hearing about it and she'd heard everything that Percival had heard, apart from a handful of private discussions with Stacy Roosevelt. It had to be a trick of some kind, yet the missiles had been very real. How had they done it? She listened as the rebels broadcast their demand for surrender and shook her head. Percival wouldn't have the sense to surrender, which meant that the fortress — and the other eight in orbit around Camelot — were about to be destroyed. Penny reached down and touched the pistol at her belt. She could use it, gun down Percival and surrender to the rebels.

The hatch opened and two Blackshirts — their eyes dull with the effects of the drugs they used — stepped inside. Penny read her fate in their eyes and reached for her pistol, but it was too late. One of them threw himself at her, knocked her to the deck and tore the pistol away, before yanking her hands behind her back and securing them with a single strip of malleable metal. He hauled her to her feet, searched her roughly, and started to march her towards the hatch — and stopped. Another pair of Blackshirts was standing there, holding

stunners.

Her captor blinked. “Who are you?” He asked, in a cold dead voice. “What are you doing here?”

The newcomers stunned him and his mate. Penny swayed, barely able to keep her balance, as they collapsed to the ground like sacks of potatoes. The second pair of Blackshirts — they looked more alert, as if they hadn’t been taking their drugs — looked at her. She had the uneasy feeling that they were communicating with each other in a manner she couldn’t detect, or understand. Who were they?

One of the newcomers winked at her, lifted his stunner and shot her with it. There was a blue-white flash and then she collapsed into darkness. The last thing she heard, before the darkness closed in completely, was an unfamiliar voice giving orders in a tone that suggested he knew he would be obeyed.

“Take her to the ship,” he ordered. “This fortress will not remain intact much longer.”

* * *

Commander Alan Redfield felt nothing, but numb horror. His cousin’s sister-in-law, who happened to be related to someone in the Imperial Navy Personnel Department, had promised him a nice safe posting for his time in the Imperial Navy. Camelot had been safe enough; the world might be thoroughly unpleasant, but it was improving and the recreational facilities were first-rate. He’d even spent some of his leave enjoying a VR simulation, something rare outside the Core Worlds.

And now, death had come to the Camelot System. He couldn’t understand how the rebels had obtained so much firepower, but they had… and sixteen superdreadnaughts had been wiped out, just because their commanders had been unwilling to believe that there was a real threat. Captain Quick, who had at least tried to warn her superior, had been slapped and dismissed. Alan shuddered in disgust. He had known that Captain Quick was the Admiral’s mistress — unwillingly, he guessed — yet he hadn’t realised how far Percival was prepared to go.

The Admiral himself was still in his command chair, staring at where the icons representing Commodore William’s superdreadnaughts had been. If he had heard the communication from the rebels — it had been on all channels; Alan had heard it through his earpiece — he gave no sign. He spoke no defiance nor craven surrender.

Alan took a breath. As Duty Officer, it was his job to alert the

Admiral to any new developments, yet a word from Percival could wreck his career, *despite* his handful of well-placed family members. If the Admiral was prepared to destroy the woman who shared his bed, what would he do to a junior officer who lacked even that small contact with the Admiral? On the other hand, the sight of so many superdreadnaughts bearing down on him did tend to concentrate the mind.

"Admiral," he said, trying to sound as business-like as possible, "the rebels are demanding a response."

"I'll give them a response," Percival bellowed. His sudden shift from silence to outright rage was disorientating. "I'll blow his ships to plasma and throw the bastard out of an airlock!"

"Admiral," Alan said, quietly. He knew that he was taking his career in his hands, but somehow it was growing harder to care. His older brother had called him a coward and perhaps he was right. The thought of dying because his Admiral had refused to see sense and surrender was too much. "We cannot win this fight. Those superdreadnaughts have enough firepower to cut through the datanet and destroy this fortress. It may take them time to obliterate all of the fortresses, but they can do it."

He hesitated on the next few words. "And they have offered to accept your surrender and even offered to guarantee your safe conduct," he added. If Percival was a coward, as his behaviour seemed to suggest, it might appeal to him when more logical arguments failed. "You could return home and…"

"Be silent," Percival snapped. He stood up and marched over to the tactical console. Nothing, not even his superbly-tailored uniform, could disguise the fear running through his body and voice. Alan could see sweat staining his uniform. "When they enter weapons range, you are ordered to open fire. Do you understand me?"

He turned to stare at Alan. "*Do you understand me*?"

There was only one answer to that. "Yes, sir," Alan said. He glanced down at the console to avoid looking any further at Percival. "I understand. The enemy ships will enter firing range in twelve minutes."

"Open fire as soon as they enter firing range and then keep firing until their ships are smashed," Percival ordered. "Do not quit firing without my permission."

* * *

Colin kept his expression calm and composed, but inwardly he could feel worry working its way through his system. There were nine

battle stations in orbit around the planet, positioned so that at least four of them could engage his fleet at any one time. He was still advancing forward, yet if Percival didn't see sense — or at least what Colin wanted him to see — and surrender, he would have to fall back, reload the arsenal ships and return to the system. And that would blow any lingering belief that the superdreadnaughts were real out of Percival's mind.

He checked the display. Superdreadnaughts couldn't go much closer to the planet without being caught in the gravity shadow, preventing escape, although the drones could continue to advance and simply be ordered to self-destruct before they could be captured. Even so, he did have his sole squadron of superdreadnaughts and if Percival didn't surrender, he would have to flicker out. The timer was ticking down…

* * *

Alan watched as the enemy superdreadnaughts drew closer, their tactical sensors already locking onto the fortress and supplying information to their missiles. The fortresses had deployed their countermeasures, of course, but unlike starships it was very hard to hide the presence of a fortress. They were so massive that they actually generated tiny gravitational fields of their own.

An alarm pinged, seconds before the entire fortress shook. "Admiral," he said, "a gunboat just flickered out of Shuttlebay Two!"

Percival turned his dead eyes on him. He didn't seem to care, even though whoever was in the gunboat had not only cut through several levels of encryption that were supposed to prevent it, but risked the destruction of the entire fortress.

"Ignore it," he said, harshly. "Prepare to engage the enemy."

Alan made up his mind. "Admiral," he said, carefully, "I hereby relieve you of command under Section IR-23 of Imperial Navy Regulations."

Percival spun around to stare at him. "This is mutiny," he snapped. Section IR-23 dealt with commanding officers who showed signs of madness. It was rarely used, not least because misusing it carried heavy penalties. "You are…"

He reached for the pistol at his belt and Alan leapt at him. Perhaps wisely, Percival had refused to allow his officers to carry weapons, but Percival was badly out of shape and in no condition for a tussle. Alan knocked him to the ground, picked up his pistol and used the butt to knock the Admiral out. No one moved to stop him, even though they knew that there were armed Blackshirts just outside

the hatch. Something would have to be done about them. At the moment, Alan had no idea what. He had never considered mutiny, even as a private mental exercise.

"Contact the rebels," he ordered. The officers moved to obey, leaving him wondering what to do next. "Tell them… tell them that we would like to surrender."

He keyed the main command network. It demanded Percival's identification, so he held Percival's hand to the sensor and allowed it to read the implant concealed within his palm. The computer network opened up in front of him and he transmitted a surrender order into the datanet. He doubted that anyone would question it. They all knew the odds. Besides, he knew of no one besides Stacy Roosevelt who liked Percival.

"They're acknowledging," the communications officer said. "Marines are on the way."

"Good," Alan said. He checked the command hatch and sealed it with Percival's authority. "And now all we have to do is hold out till then."

Chapter Forty-Seven

"She's stepped down her scans," the pilot said, as the assault shuttles flew towards the massive orbital fortress. "I think the surrender is genuine."

"Or they're tracking us on passive sensors and they're planning to blow us apart when we get into point-blank range," another Marine put in. Wisecracking was an old Marine tradition, if only to serve as a barrier against tension, but few would argue that it sometimes went too far. "We might be the first to find out that it is a trick."

Neil shrugged, knowing that the motion — and his scowl — would be invisible inside his armour. If the defenders intended to fire on the Marines, there would be no warning, not now that they'd gotten into energy range. Weapons designed to tear through starships and induce atomic fission in their component molecules wouldn't have any trouble vaporising the Marine shuttles — and, as the blast would be moving at the speed of light, the first notice they'd have of its presence would be when the shuttles exploded.

The Imperial Navy didn't have much practice at surrenders; wrack his brain as he might, he couldn't remember the last time an Imperial Navy warship surrendered, unless he counted the mutiny Admiral Walker had led. No full-sized orbital fortress had ever surrendered to an outside force, not when the First Interstellar War had promised nothing, but destruction for humanity. Whatever the Dathi had in mind for humanity, in an alternate reality where they had won the war, their treatment of prisoners of war had been appalling. Humanity hadn't taken long to return the favour — and grow out of the habit of trying to take prisoners. It was quite possible that it was a trick, although God alone knew what Percival thought he could get out of it. Perhaps he was thinking of the chance to take some hostages of his own, or maybe a few bargaining chips? There was no way to know for sure.

His lips twitched humourlessly. Percival had no way of knowing, but each of the shuttles carried a full-sized warhead powerful enough to damage the station if it was detonated inside the shuttlebay. It wouldn't be enough to break through the armour if detonated on the hull, yet if it went off inside the fortress it would wreck the entire station. No one was sure if the station would actually survive, but it would definitely render the station useless for the foreseeable future. It would probably not be worth attempting to repair the station at all.

He peered though his implants as the station grew closer, growing larger and more daunting all the time. The station's mass was relatively equal to a superdreadnaught's, but its boxy exterior was

covered in weapons and point defence systems. He knew, from previous exercises, that the interior of the station was designed to resist a boarding party as much as it was designed to make fighting off an invading fleet relatively simple. The Imperial Navy used comparable stations to hold down rebellious worlds and, from time to time, resistance groups had managed to get armed fighters onboard. Neil had investigated one such action seven years ago and had concluded that the rebels had succeeded through paying hefty bribes.

"They're opening the main shuttlebay for us," the pilot said. "They've opened the flight management system to my computers and there is no sign of trouble."

"Ah, but there wouldn't be, would there?" Neil asked. He glanced down at the plan of the rotating station in his HUD. "Tell them that we are diverting to Shuttlebay Four" — a shuttlebay closer to the station's command centre than the main shuttlebay, normally only used for inspection flights — "and that we will be docking in two minutes."

"Yes, sir," the pilot said. He didn't question Neil's order, for it was a common boarding practice when Marines boarded potentially-hostile ships. If the station's crew had arranged any unpleasant surprises for them, the Marines wouldn't oblige them by coming in the entrance they'd selected. "They're opening the other shuttlebay for us now."

Neil felt the tension rise as the shuttle rose up towards a glowing hatch and flew into the station. Normally, the station would have insisted on using a tractor beam or a gravity field to ensure that there were no accidents, but there was no way he would have agreed to that when boarding a station. Instead, the pilot put them down on the deck, using the shuttle's drive fields, and the Marines dived out of the craft and onto the deck. No hail of fire greeted them. There was no one there at all, apart from a single crewman who was looking rather bemused.

"Welcome onboard," he stammered. Neil smiled to himself. The surrender might have been sent out in Percival's name and none of the other stations would dare object, but the command station — he wondered, absently, if the station had a name — had suffered what was, in effect, a mutiny. The whole situation was dangerously unstable and could explode at any minute, which was why he'd brought four whole companies of Marines along and assigned them to the boarding party. "Ah… Commander Redfield sends his compliments and invites you to join him in the command centre."

Neil grinned. He'd been right. No one knew how to surrender. The thought was almost amusing. It wasn't as if there were drills for surrendering a station. "Good," he said. "I'm afraid that more of my

men are going to be boarding the station and securing vital locations. Please inform Commander Redfield that any resistance will result in harsh punishment. My people have orders to use deadly force."

The man's face drained of colour. Neil rolled his eyes behind his helmet. Of course; who else would hold a position on a massive fortress, apart from a coward. The man was certainly afraid to contradict him, although *that* wasn't a problem. It might make the occupation easier.

"Yes, sir," the man said, finally. "Ah… should I escort you to the command centre?"

"Of course," Neil said. "Lead the way, please."

He followed the officer through the station's passageways, concealing his surprise at how few crewmen they encountered. A quick query of the station's datanet — unlocked for them to access as part of the surrender terms — revealed that most of the crew had been ordered to go to their quarters and remain there, while the Blackshirts had been sent to the gym. It was large enough to contain an entire company of Blackshirts for a brief period, although Neil didn't hesitate to dispatch several platoons of Marines to keep an eye on them. The Blackshirts might not accept any orders to surrender and try to put up armed resistance. Luckily, they weren't wearing proper armour, allowing the Marines to vent the compartments and suffocate them if necessary. Neil wasn't inclined to take chances.

The command centre's hatches had been locked open, allowing him to stride right into the nerve centre of the station. Commander Alan Redfield — a young man with a developing paunch — looked up at him nervously, then stood to attention and saluted. Neil returned the salute, just before noticing a grossly-overweight man lying on the deck, groaning. Admiral Percival looked just as ugly as he'd been told.

"Welcome onboard," Redfield said. Neil suspected that he meant it. The prospects of a Blackshirt mutiny had to have been floating through the Commander's mind. "I surrender this station and the planet to you."

"I accept your surrender," Neil said, equally formally. He wasn't sure if Redfield had the authority to surrender the planet, but if someone on Camelot wanted to try to hold out it would last as long as it took to drop a KEW on their base. Very few planets had ground-based planetary defence centres, if only because taking them out always tore up the real estate and inflicted vast damage on the planetary surface. "I believe that my commander will wish to make an offer to you all, but until then I have to treat you with some care."

"I understand," Redfield said. He didn't sound unhappy about it, but then… it was clear that he believed that he was lucky to be alive. The images of over eighty superdreadnaughts surrounding the planet

floated in space, suggesting that the sensors on the fortress couldn't tell the real superdreadnaughts from the drones. "Sir… what about him?"

He gestured to Percival, who was clearly trying to wake up from his unwanted slumber. The bruise on his face suggested that someone had knocked him out.

"We'll take him into custody," Neil said. Admiral Walker would probably want to deal with him personally. Neil didn't care. He might never have known Percival personally, but the bastard represented everything that was wrong with the Empire, from power without accountability to corruption and decadence. "We don't want someone to damage him before we can decide what to do with the bastard."

He smiled. Judging from the damage someone had inflicted on the Admiral, it was clear that Admiral Walker hadn't been the only person he'd managed to offend. If he'd been winning friends and influencing people at his usual rate — if Walker's stories were to be believed — he'd be lucky to survive long enough to stand trial.

"That leaves the others," he said. "How many other high-ranking officers are here?"

"Commodore Roosevelt is down on the planet," Redfield said. Neil grinned, remembering his last meeting with Stacy Roosevelt. If it hadn't been for her connections, she would have been shot for gross incompetence; even *with* her connections, she would never see command again. "Captain Quick, the Admiral's former… *aide* was relieved of duty. She was sent to her quarters."

"Good," Neil said. He shook his head. "I think you had better go to your quarters, at least until we have this station firmly under control."

It took thirty minutes to confirm that the station was occupied, once the Blackshirts had been surrounded and disarmed. Neil had expected trouble, but once he'd started to pump the air out of the gym they'd become very reasonable very quickly. The Blackshirts had marched out with their hands held high and had been searched and stripped, before being transferred to one of the freighters which would provide transport to the prison world. There were so many Blackshirts on the surface now that it probably rated as a first-stage colony — or would, if there had been an equal number of women on the surface. There were no female Blackshirts — and the others who had refused to join the rebellion were sent to the other side of the planet.

"We searched the station," a Marine reported. "There is no sign of Captain Quick."

Neil frowned, puzzled. The station's internal sensors were superb, far superior to anything they'd deployed outside the station. It should have been impossible for anyone to hide for long, even if they knew

enough about the sensor network to circumvent it in some compartments. His mind drifted back to the report of a gunboat jumping out of the station — a risky trick that could have torn the station apart — and wondered if she had been on the ship. It would have been a ballsy stunt, but doable.

"Leave it for the moment," he said, finally. Tracking down one officer wasn't a priority for the moment. "We have other fish to fry."

* * *

Four hours after the station had been declared secure — and the planet had surrendered at gunpoint — Colin was welcomed onboard the station by the Marines. The Colonel showed him around, allowing him a chance to inspect Admiral Percival's quarters before introducing him to some of the surrendered officers. All of the battle stations had surrendered, although their senior officers couldn't be trusted. They'd been separated from their men and transported onboard the prison barge. Colin had no idea what would become of them in the future — although he would have to decide it soon enough — but it didn't matter. Manning the stations was the important issue for the moment. Percival's fleet might have been smashed, but the Imperial Navy was far from defeated. It might take them a few months to put together a more powerful force, yet Colin knew that one would be on the way sooner or later.

The Marines had, at his request, assembled most of the station's officers and men in one of the big shuttlebays. Colin remembered, in a sudden flicker of déjà vu, speaking to his men following the first mutiny. Then, he'd spoken from the heart, telling them that the mutiny might fail and that they might all die for his cause. Now… now, whatever else happened, the Empire's faith in its own superiority wouldn't survive, even if the Popular Front was destroyed. The next rebellion might topple the Empire completely.

Or perhaps the Empire will reform of its own accord, he thought, as he stared out over the waiting ranks of personnel. *And maybe the horse will learn to sing.*

"There isn't much I can say that wasn't said in the message we introduced into the Interstellar Communications Network," he said. Whatever else happened, whatever else he did, he wasn't going to try to bullshit them. They deserved better than that. "We intend to force the Empire to reform, to break the stranglehold of the Thousand Families and create a new order that will allow each and every one of us to rise to the level we deserve, rather than the level determined for us by birth. We will give the worlds the right to determine their own

affairs and remove the stain on our honour caused by the frequent crushing of rebellions. I invite each and every one of you to join us.

"I wish I could promise you a victory, but the truth is that we are far from the end of our war," he added. He'd cribbed the next line from one of the banned history books he'd read while in the Beyond. "All we have done here is merely the end of the beginning, not the beginning of the end. The Imperial Navy is strong and the Thousand Families will feel sure that they are fighting for their own survival. There will be others who will believe that the Empire's ultimate purpose justifies any amount of repression and who will fight us, not for evil reasons, but out of a deep concern for the future of the human race. There is no guarantee of victory.

"If you wish to join us, please make your intentions known to one of the Marines," he concluded. "If you wish to remain with the Empire, you have a number of possibilities. We can repatriate you to the Empire or transport you to an isolated world in the Beyond that is capable of feeding and housing you until the war is over, one way or the other. We will not punish you for choosing to believe that the wording of your oaths is more important than the sentiment behind them. We all swore to uphold the Empire, yet who is the true enemy?

"Whatever choice you make, I guarantee you one thing. We will attempt to accommodate you as much as possible."

He saluted them and turned, leaving the compartment before they saw just how much his choice of words had affected him. He'd dreamed great dreams, yet part of him had never quite believed that he would make it, that he would be caught and killed long before he reached his goal. And now his old tormentor was his prisoner and the sector was effectively in his hands. No other world in the sector could stand against him now. Given a few months, he could use the sector to add to his industrial resources, putting together a creditable challenge to the entire Empire.

But the Empire would know that as well, he knew. They'd send the Imperial Navy to reclaim or destroy the lost worlds. And the Popular Front would have to defend them. It was strange, but true; their strength was also their weakness. The rebellion had taken worlds now and had to fight to keep them, which would keep their forces tied down in their defence. The tactical situation had changed, but perhaps not improved.

"Let me know what they decide," he said, to the Marine. He had three other visits to make. "I want to see Percival."

* * *

Penny came back to awareness slowly, more aware of the dryness in her throat and the throbbing in her temples than she was of her surroundings. She could feel that she was lying on a bunk, with something wrapped around her wrist. A restraint, she wondered, before realising that it felt too light to be a restraint. Her eyes opened suddenly and she realised that she had been left in an unfamiliar compartment, one that seemed to throb with energy. She sat up and nearly collapsed as her head suddenly swam, a wave of dizziness passing through her skull. Memory returned and she realised that she had been stunned. Wherever she was, it wasn't Percival's station.

"Welcome back to the living," a voice said. She looked up to see a man sitting by the side of her bunk, a man she didn't recognise. He was a tall lanky fellow, with short untameable hair and long delicate hands. He couldn't have been more different from Percival. "How are you feeling?"

"Awful," Penny said. Her voice sounded thick in her own ears. "Where am I?"

"All in good time, my dear," the man said. He reached out to touch the band around her wrist and she realised that it was a medical sensor. "You need a shower and a change and then we will talk." He nodded towards a pile of clothes on a small table as he stood up. "I'll leave you alone now, but you're not stupid enough to believe that you are unobserved."

Penny watched him go, before she managed to stand up and stagger towards the tiny bathroom. As promised, there was a small shower waiting for her. Undressing was a hassle, but her own curiosity pushed her onwards. Wherever the ship was taking her — and she was sure that she was on a starship — it had to be better than Camelot.

Chapter Forty-Eight

The Empire recognised no right to privacy, Colin knew; unless one happened to be very well-born, a person could be watched at any time by Imperial Intelligence, often for no other reason than because the officer in charge wanted to spy on a pretty girl. It was a power that was often abused, yet few cared enough to try to fix it. The station's brig therefore included monitors that allowed him to watch the prisoners with no fear of them sensing his gaze.

Percival had been treated badly by his subordinates, according to the medic who had inspected him and treated his wounds. Quite apart from the blow that had knocked him out, it had been clear that he had been kicked several times, including one kick that had caved in a couple of ribs. The medic had fixed most of the damage easily, yet it would be a long time before Percival recovered. He sat on the bunk in the brig, his hands cuffed together and attached to the deck, his piggish eyes staring at nothing. He was no longer the proud confident figure the young Colin had admired, or the older arrogant asshole that had been so confident that Colin could be used and then thrown away, without any hope at all of extracting retribution.

Colin felt the pistol at his belt and scowled. No one would stop him if he wanted to walk into the brig, draw his pistol and shoot Percival through the head. He could shoot him, or beat him to death with his bare hands, or strangle him, or throw him out of an airlock… there were so many possibilities. No one would object if he wanted to spend the next few hours torturing his nemesis, inflicting horrific damage and then allowing the medics to heal Percival, before Colin tortured him again. He doubted that Percival had a single friend in the entire system. The fact that his own subordinates had turned on him at the end suggested that he had never changed, that he had never realised the need to cultivate respect and loyalty. The same uncaring attitude, that the lower orders existed only to be used and then thrown aside, that had led him to try to destroy Colin had led right to Percival's final defeat. Let him squirm as he may, Colin knew; there was no way that the Empire would forgive him. The man who had lost control over an entire sector had no future.

His thoughts tormented him. How many times had he dreamed about killing Percival? When he'd been trapped on the patrol base, with few prospects for escape or advancement, he had plotted hundreds of ways to kill his tormentor. The dark vindictive fantasies had kept him going, from the moment when he had sworn bloody revenge until he had made his grab for the Observation Squadron. Captain-Commodore Howell had died at Colin's hands, the first of so

many, killed for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Why should he *not* kill Percival? Who would object if he chose to execute him on the spot?

Percival had grown fat over the years, Colin saw, even though removing the fat would have been the work of a few minutes in sickbay. His weight was a message in itself; Percival didn't care what anyone else thought of his physical beauty, even though he was prepared to toady to anyone who had a higher social rank than his own. Colin had interviewed Commander Redfield and a handful of others and they had all agreed that Percival had been bedding Captain Quick, a woman who had provided the brains and tactical acumen Percival so desperately needed. She had vanished, apparently on a gunboat that had been able to flicker out while inside the station. Colin couldn't blame her for running, yet there were too many unanswered questions surrounding her. The Imperial Navy banned gunboats and assault shuttles from trying to flicker out while inside a station or a starship. It was too easy for the jump to damage or destroy the mothership. The gunboat's computers should have automatically prevented the jump from taking place.

Angrily, cursing his own weakness, Colin strode through the portal and into the brig. Percival looked up at him, his eyes going wide with a hint of fear and panic before he lowered them to the deck, trying to hide his feelings. It didn't matter. Percival had rarely bothered to hide his feelings from his subordinates and he was out of practice. Colin saw it well before it could be hidden. He took the interrogator's chair and sat, facing Percival.

"You're a traitor," Percival said, finally. Colin shivered, remembering the voice, the strange combination of a high-class accent from Earth and the broader accent of an Academy graduate. Percival must have hated losing the accent that had marked him as one of the Thousand Families, even though he was — by birth — only on the edge of High Society. He'd planned and schemed and fought to claw his way to the top, never caring about who got crushed underfoot. "My patrons will crush you for this."

Colin snorted. "After everything else I have done," he said, flatly, "don't you think that they will have some trouble deciding what crime they're actually going to execute me for?"

Percival didn't see the joke. "You are tearing away at the Empire," he said, softly. "Do you really feel that the rebel underground could run something the size of the Empire? They would tear the Empire apart within a week. We run the Empire because we can take the long view…"

Colin drew his pistol in one smooth motion and held it to Percival's head. The Admiral's eyes went very wide. He hadn't

believed that Colin would — or could — kill him. Percival had always been able to game the system and ensure that the outcome, whatever it was, allowed him to survive and prosper. But Colin was outside the system and was no longer bound by its rules. He could shoot and kill Percival; he could do *anything* to Percival. Colin sniffed in disgust. Percival was so scared that he'd lost control of his bladder.

"Tell me something," Colin said, fighting down the urge to simply pull the trigger and put Percival out of everyone's misery. "Do you really believe that mass murder and genocide helps preserve the Empire? You sent your ships to Jackson's Folly and killed a fifth of the planet's population. You crushed revolts and slaughtered people who wanted to choose their own way in life. You…"

Percival started to stammer. It took him a moment to speak clearly. "You fool," he said, as if he expected Colin to pull the trigger at any moment. "The little people are incapable of running their own lives. How do you expect something the size of the Empire to survive if everyone is pulling in different directions? We have a duty to control them to save the Empire and preserve the human race."

Colin slapped him, hard. Percival cried out, his pale cheek burning red where Colin had hit him, yet somehow he remained upright. Colin stared down at him, fighting the desire to hurt Percival, to tear him apart or shoot him or… there were too many possibilities.

And yet, if he killed Percival in cold blood, what would it mean for the future?

"You're wrong," Colin said, holding his voice steady through a colossal act of will. "You are the one tightening your grip so hard that eventually there will be a rebellion that will tear the Empire apart. What makes you special? Only the fact that one of your very distant ancestors did something important, many years ago, long before you were born. You cannot keep stamping down on the human race forever."

Percival looked up at him. Colin wondered absently if the man was in shock. No one had dared to lift a hand to him in the past, yet now he'd been slapped twice in the same day and found himself stripped of all status. It would have been a dizzying fall. No one deserved it more, yet Colin felt a flicker of sympathy and hated himself for the thought. How could he feel any sympathy for his nemesis at all?

"Answer me one other question," Colin said. "Answer me… and I will know if you lie. Why did you betray me?"

There was a long pause. "Because you're nothing," Percival said. He'd clearly decided to tell the truth, even though it might mean a bullet in the head. His voice became mocking, tearing away at whatever remained of Colin's self-control. "You were someone with

ideas above your station. I fed those ideas as long as I needed you, then I discarded you when you were no longer required and replaced you with someone who was so much more useful. You were never important to me, Walker; I never thought about you after I'd discarded you. You were just a tool."

His mouth lolled open. "And you thought that it was personal," he added. "What are you to me? I didn't care enough for it to be personal. You were nothing."

Colin lifted the pistol and pointed it at Percival's forehead. "You want to know something else?" Percival added. "You come in here and condemn me for doing what I had to do to maintain the Empire. You are just as guilty as I am. You helped plan missions that slaughtered rebels and crushed entire planets. You are responsible for many of the acts you whine about now. Your hands are as bloody as mine and consider; without you, would I have become the Sector Commander?"

A red mist seemed to descend across Colin's mind. It took everything he had not to fire the pistol and kill the Admiral in cold blood. Slowly, he fought for calm. Percival deserved something more… appropriate than a mere bullet in the head.

"You may be right," Colin said, returning the pistol to his holster. "I may be partly complicit in your crimes. I'll tell you this, though; I *will* redeem myself and the service I swore to serve until the end of my days. And in the end, few will remember you. You will just be a figure of fun for historians to chuckle over."

He stood up and walked to the hatch, turning before he left the cell. "I haven't quite decided what to do with you," he added, "but I will tell you this. There is a strong feeling that we should just send you back to the Empire. They're going to be desperate to find someone to blame for this little… crisis. Perhaps we should give them someone, eh?"

Colin walked out and the hatch hissed closed behind him, cutting off Percival's parting shot — if he shouted anything. Percival might well believe him. The Empire *would* want someone to blame and, if Percival was the sole survivor from the higher ranks, it would be him. Their method of execution would be far more imaginative and painful than anything Colin could hand out for him.

He ignored the presence of the Marine and paused long enough to recover his temper, running through breathing exercises he had learned at the Academy. Percival had managed to get under his skin, all the more so because everything he had said had the unmistakable ring of truth. Colin had believed — had chosen to believe — that Percival had it in for him personally, yet Percival's own words countered that. Colin… had just been there when Percival had wanted

a tool. Colin's own ambition had blinded him about his true place in Percival's scheme of things.

Eventually, he walked down to the second brig and looked down at the monitors. Stacy Roosevelt was lying on the bunk, staring up at nothing. She had actually tried to hide when the Marines landed to arrest her, but the staff at the resort — for high ranking offices and managers only, of course — had betrayed her at once. She hadn't been any better than Percival at making friends and winning allies. Stacy was wearing only what she had on when she'd been arrested; a bikini top and a pair of shorts. The impression was that of a young and innocent girl with disturbingly old eyes.

Colin felt his vindictive streak boiling up within him and he walked on, pushing Stacy to the back of his mind. The third brig held someone he didn't know personally, Spencer O'Conner. The older man — even with regeneration treatments, he was clearly aging and his file claimed that he was over a hundred and thirty years old — was the Roosevelt Family's manager, the grown-up sent to watch Stacy and the planets the Family had seeded over the years. Colin had been intrigued the moment he'd seen the file, because the choice of O'Conner was odd. He wasn't a direct family member, so he couldn't be trusted completely… so why was he out in Sector 117?

O'Conner looked up as Colin opened the hatch and stepped into the brig. He moved with a delicacy that suggested that his body's coordination was wearing out, no matter how healthy he looked. His white hair seemed to shine in the light; his blue eyes were alarmingly perceptive. Someone who had lived so long, Colin knew, would have developed remarkable skills for reading a person, or a situation. Again, he wondered why O'Conner had been sent out to serve the Roosevelt Family. It didn't quite add up.

"The famous Commander Walker," O'Conner said. His voice was far more accented than Percival's duller tones. "I trust you will understand if I don't get up?"

He rattled his chains to illustrate his point. "Of course," Colin said, as he took the interrogator's chair. O'Conner seemed to exude charm, which might explain why he'd been given the job — whatever the job had truly been. "I trust that *you* will understand if I get right to the point? What were you building for the Roosevelt Family in this sector?"

O'Conner didn't try to mislead him. "I'm afraid I cannot discuss that, Commander," he said. "It isn't a matter I can answer now."

Colin frowned, peering at him over his fingertips. "Do you have an implanted mental block, or are you just being loyal to the Family?"

"The latter," O'Conner said. "Sadly, mental blocks are not as helpful as they would seem to suggest, not when the subject needs to

talk openly. I hate to insult your intelligence, Commander, but I'm afraid there is no way you can get me to talk."

Colin snorted. "I hate to insult *your* intelligence, but I'm sure that you know there are plenty of ways that information can be extracted from an unwilling donor," he reminded him, dryly. "I assume that you have an implant providing some protection from torture? How long do you think it would protect you once the Geeks take it apart?"

O'Conner smiled, drolly. "What makes you think I know anything?"

"You're in a high position within a Family-run sector, *without* being a member of the Family's inner core," Colin countered. "The only reason I can think of for that is that you're intended to avoid attracting attention, which would inevitably follow any senior Family member wherever he went."

He grinned. "And I guess that that explains Stacy," he added. The older man's face twitched at her name. "She was meant to distract attention from *you*. What do you think she would tell us if we asked her?"

O'Conner grinned back. "And how much do you think someone like Stacy actually *knows*? Would you trust her with your deepest secrets?"

"Touché," Colin said. "What do you know?"

"I want to make a deal," O'Conner said, flatly. "You give me and my family — my wife and children — a safe place to live. In exchange, I will tell you what you want to know."

Colin didn't hesitate. "Very well," he said. "What is the Roosevelt Family doing in this sector?"

"Plotting a war," O'Conner said. He laughed at Colin's expression. "Did you think that you were the only one who noticed that the Empire was in deep trouble?"

"Explain," Colin ordered, tartly.

"The Empire has been stagnant for years," O'Conner said. "There is little in the way of expansion, or technological advancement — even the new colonies, planted by the Thousand Families, rapidly turn into just more stagnant worlds. The Thousand Families are having problems maintaining what they have and the booty is running out. When it is all gone… the Thousand Families will turn on one another. The Roosevelt Family's private predictions suggest that civil war will break out within the next two hundred years."

Colin shivered. He had thought of the Thousand Families as a single monolith, even after recruiting one of them to his banner. He had never considered that there might be cracks in the edifice, not when the only thing keeping the Empire together was the united power of the Families. Parliament was a joke and there was no

Emperor. And the Imperial Navy's officers, by and large, owed their position to their patrons. The Imperial Navy would come apart at the seams as the clients sought to seize fleets, squadrons and even individual starships for their patrons. The result would be absolute chaos.

"If we'd had longer, we would have been producing an entire fleet in this sector," O'Conner confirmed. "An entire sector, loyal to the Roosevelt Family; do you have any idea how hard it was to keep the other Families and their clients out of the sector? The discovery of Jackson's Folly almost torpedoed the whole scheme."

Colin smiled, although there was little humour in his mind. "That must have been irritating," he said. "Does Percival know anything about this?"

"No," O'Conner said. He leaned forward. "As a gesture of good faith, I'll tell you something else you need to know and then" — he rattled his chains meaningfully — "you can find me some better accommodation. Admiral Percival sent for help."

He smiled at Colin's expression. "He requested everything that Sector 99 could dispatch," he added. "There are three entire squadrons of superdreadnaughts coming here. I think you'd better start preparing to meet them."

Chapter Forty-Nine

Although she suspected that she wasn't somewhere most citizens of the Empire would be pleased to be, Penny took her time with her shower and ablations. Her body hurt from being stunned — and probably drugged to keep her under — and she wanted time to think. She allowed the warm water to wash down her body, wiping away the stain of being touched by Percival and his goons, all the while trying to work out where she was now. Her thoughts kept running in circles until she finally dismissed it; there was no way that she could deduce anything from what little she'd seen.

Stepping out of the shower compartment, she was amused to discover a neatly-folded pile of clothes, all in her size. There was a standard Imperial Navy shipsuit — without rank markings, she noted with wry amusement — and a standard pair of undergarments. It occurred to her, as she started to pull them on, that unseen watchers were probably enjoying the sight, but she'd lost most of her body modesty back at the Academy. Besides, if she was in the hands of Imperial Intelligence or one of the other security forces, body modesty would soon be the least of her worries. No one was interrogating her or threatening to try her with treason and blow her out an airlock.

Once she was dressed, she stepped up to the hatch and — somewhat to her surprise — it opened. Her first glimpse of the passage outside confirmed her suspicions that she was on a small craft, perhaps a shape barely larger than a gunboat. There were some luxury yachts, pleasure craft owned by high-ranking officers and aristocrats, which had roughly the same dimensions. The craft wouldn't be very large, certainly not more than one or two decks, with most of the rear made up of engine. Judging from the drive noise she could hear in the background, the tiny ship had been outfitted with a military-grade drive. Very few, whatever their rank or station, would have been permitted such a drive for their own private craft. She walked down the corridor and up to the bridge hatch, which hissed open as she approached. The interior of the bridge barely deserved that name. It was small, compact, and designed for a tiny crew. A single person, with the right knowledge and training, could operate the entire ship.

"Well, come on in," a voice said. She saw a chair spinning around, revealing the man she'd seen when she'd woken up. He might have been the only person she'd seen, but it didn't mean that he was the only person on the ship. A small craft could carry upwards of thirty people, depending on interior design. "How are you feeling now?"

"Refreshed," Penny said, shortly. She took the chair he waved her

to and checked the nearest display. It wasn't showing a standard Imperial Navy display, but it was easy to understand. She was gratified that her early deduction of the size of the starship was accurate. "What am I doing here?"

The man leaned back in his chair and Penny took the opportunity to study him. He was unusually tall, with a long lanky body and a pair of hands that were always in motion. His face, striking rather than handsome, was topped by an unruly mob of brown hair. She couldn't tell for sure, but he appeared to have some kind of combat training, although she couldn't identify the discipline. He wore nothing apart from a single unmarked shipsuit and a standard-issue wristcom.

"The short answer is that you're here because your testimony will be required," the man said. He paused, anticipating her next question. "You may call me Dave, if you wish."

Penny frowned, stroking her chin. At least Dave seemed to be more pleasant company than Percival. "You're Imperial Intelligence," she guessed, finally. "You were sent here to keep an eye on Percival."

"In a manner of speaking," Dave said. She was certain that his name wasn't Dave, but if he'd gone through the full Imperial Intelligence program, he probably didn't recall what his name actually was, or where he had been born, or anything else that gave him a tie outside of Imperial Intelligence. "I had orders to keep an eye on the Roosevelt Family and their clients in this sector."

Penny found herself giggling for the first time in far too long. "You poor bastard," she said. "You had to control Stacy Roosevelt!"

Dave chuckled back. "No, I merely had to keep an eye on them," he said. "When the rebellion began, I started to observe more closely and decided that the situation was likely to grow out of hand. When the rebel fleet attacked Camelot, I resolved to secure a living witness and jump out of the system before Percival could surrender or die."

"Oh," Penny said. She decided she might as well ask. "Did Percival surrender then?"

"Someone did," Dave confirmed. "The last I heard before I started flying back towards Earth was that the fortresses were surrendering and that Marines were landing on the stations. Percival may have surrendered or someone with more than two brain cells to rub together might have removed him and surrendered in his place. And no, I don't know if he is still alive. The leader of the rebellion has a bloody great grudge against him."

Penny shrugged. There would be time, later, to consider her feelings… but for the moment, all she really felt was relief. Percival had dominated her life for years, yet now it was over, leaving nothing apart from fading memories. The time she'd spent serving him — in all possible senses — might have been wasted, but it could have been

much worse. Or perhaps, if events had been a little different, she would have gone over to the rebellion.

"But that doesn't matter," Dave continued, unaware of her inner thoughts. "As nice as it would be to drag Admiral Percival before the Thousand Families in chains, it isn't an option that is open to us at the moment. Our priority is to alert Earth to the scale of the danger."

Penny looked up, sharply. "We're on our way to alert Earth?"

"Of course," Dave said. He grinned at her expression. "This ship may be small, but she has a military-grade drive and top-of-the-line computers. We can make it all the way to Earth without stopping along the way. I admit the food and drink facilities are not all that they could be, but that shouldn't a problem for you. They're better than military-issue food processors."

"All the way to Earth," Penny repeated, numbly. It took a starship around six months to make the trip from Camelot to Earth, although a small fast design with a military-grade drive might be able to shave a month off the journey. She wouldn't have wanted to risk it. Burning out a flicker drive would leave a craft stranded in interstellar space, beyond any hope of rescue. "Why do you want me there?"

"So you can testify about the rebellion," Dave said, patiently. He gave her what looked like a half-hearted apologetic look. "I should warn you that the computers on this ship are programmed to work only with me or another officer with Omega-level clearance. I don't know what will happen to you at the far end, but if you behave yourself on the trip, I will…"

Penny snorted. "Put in a good word for me?"

"Something like that," Dave agreed. "You do realise that most of the people who might want to blame you for this disaster are either dead or in rebel custody? You have a good chance at coming out of this smelling like a rose."

Penny stared at him and then burst out laughing. "You have to be joking," she said, trying to hold down a choking fit. "Do you know what Imperial Intelligence will do to me?"

"I'm sorry," Dave said. "Did I say that I worked for Imperial Intelligence?"

Penny blinked. "Are you saying that you're *not* working for Imperial Intelligence?"

"I had training from them and little else," Dave said. He pursed his lips, thinking carefully. "Think of me… as one of the Household Troops. I work specifically for a single Family in the ongoing struggle for supremacy. My… employers were concerned about the Roosevelt Family's obsessive interest in this sector and dispatched me to keep an eye on them. And you know the rest."

He shrugged. "This ship doesn't have a stasis pod and I don't trust

the medical computers far enough to risk sedating you for that long," he added. "You can behave yourself and have the freedom of the ship or I can lock you into one of the cabins and leave you there until we reach Earth. Should you somehow manage to kill me… well; the ship will *still* take you to Earth. Have fun explaining my mangled remains."

Penny pretended to consider it. Assuming he was telling the truth, escape would be impossible even if she did kill or incapacitate her jailor. She wasn't a computer expert and even if she had been, reprogramming a starship while in transit was a good way to commit suicide. And besides, if he was telling the truth about working for a different Family, perhaps she could make the contacts to save herself from carrying the can for Percival's defeat.

The thought of going to Earth as a very junior officer, with neither connections nor patron, was terrifying, yet there seemed to be no choice. And the thought of killing Dave seemed impossible. If she tried to kill him — and she was sure now that he had some commando-level training, something she lacked — he would simply imprison her in a tiny cabin for six months. She'd been in superdreadnaughts and cruisers with tiny cabins and compartments for the low-ranking officers, yet she'd never been permanently confined to such a small space. It would drive her mad. And besides, perhaps Dave would be pretty good company. He could hardly be worse than Percival.

"I understand," she said, finally. "Just tell me one thing. Am I a prisoner?"

Dave did her the honour of considering the question seriously. "I do not believe that you are a prisoner," he said finally, "but honesty compels me to admit that I cannot release you, or drop you off somewhere apart from Earth." He grinned at her and Penny found herself wondering why she'd thought he wasn't particularly handsome. "If you want, consider yourself to be on parole, with me as your supervising officer. I don't think you'll get lost on this ship."

Penny chuckled, feeling the tension slowly starting to drain out of her. It would get worse, she knew, once they reached Earth, but for the moment she was safe. A starship, even a small commercial-issue design, would have an extensive library of entertainment and she could catch up with all the news she'd missed, or the reading Percival had never left her with time to do.

"I shall," she said, with a wicked smile of her own. Despite her worries she was more than a little fascinated by his job. She had known that there was conflict — subtle rather than violent — between the different Families, yet she had seen little of it. "What Family do you work for?"

"One of the greatest," Dave said. He refused to be drawn any

further, reminding her that what she didn't know she couldn't tell. Penny wanted to be offended by his remarks, but he was right — and besides, she didn't want to make him clam up any further. "Do you want to know the real nightmare?"

"Of course," Penny said. Her grandma had once told her to make sure that she learned everything she could, because information was the weapon of the weak. Her grandma, the matriarch of her family, had been a font of good advice, even if she had called Penny a whore and worse after she had found out what she was doing for Percival. The Quick family had been commoners, poor compared to even the lowest member of the Thousand Families, but they prided themselves upon honesty and decency. "What can scare the Thousand Families?"

"Opening a planet for settlement, at least the kind of settlement that might pay off its debts, costs a vast amount of money," Dave said. "It's growing harder and harder for anyone, even the greatest of the Families, to concentrate that level of wealth for a single purpose. The Empire just sucks up money, from servicing debts to paying for the Civil Service and the Imperial Navy. Few can afford to make the investments needed to create new sources of wealth and even when they do create new sources the money is drained away into the Civil Service. The Empire is bleeding itself dry."

Penny remembered her own speculations about the Roosevelt Family and felt her blood run cold. If the Roosevelt Family held the entire sector, they — and they alone — would be able to tap it for resources. Sector 117 would feed the Family and nourish it, provided that the Family lasted long enough for the wealth to start flowing. No wonder Stacy Roosevelt had been so keen to terminate the rebellion — and Jackson's Folly — so quickly. The longer they delayed, the greater the chance of someone else sticking a wedge into the sector and using it to share in the loot.

"So what," Dave asked, "happens when the money runs out?"

His face twitched into a humourless smile. "The Thousand Families will start fighting over a shrinking pool of resources," he answered his own question. "And then all hell will truly break loose. That's why we have to terminate this rebellion as quickly as possible. The loss of Sector 117 is no great threat to the Empire, but it will make the edifice shiver and start to collapse. And then the whole Empire will collapse into debris?"

Penny said something that she would never have dared say in front of Percival. "Is that such a bad thing?"

Dave didn't explode, or hit her. He just smiled. "Look at it this way," he said. "The Empire, as bad as it is, is the only thing holding the edifice together. If the Empire breaks apart, trillions of people will lose everything — and that assumes that we don't drop down all the

way into civil war. There will be a colossal disaster right across human space. Billions will die."

Penny sighed. "You don't understand," she said, tiredly. She remembered accessing — in private — the message the Popular Front had uploaded into the ICN. "The civil war is already here."

* * *

The days on the small starship — it turned out that it was called the *Hatta Mari*, for reasons Dave refused to discuss — slowly started to blur together. Dave was amusing company and Penny did find herself with enough time to catch up on her reading. She also found herself joining him for evening viewing, where he showed her some of his collection of forbidden entertainments, some of which made her laugh. The Empire's Public Entertainment Division simply didn't amuse her like the forbidden shows. Dave was careful not to tell her where he'd obtained the recordings, although Penny found herself suspecting that he had some pretty extreme connections of his own. He certainly didn't seem to be worried about her tattling on him to his superiors.

"It feels like a holiday," she said, one evening. Her time sense was also starting to blur; the ship was making several jumps, followed by a pause to allow the drive to cool down and recharge. Nothing short of a courier boat could have matched the small starship's pace and yet, Earth was still thousands of light years away. One day, she was sure, the researchers would find a way to flicker instantly anywhere… but probably not under the Empire. The Thousand Families discouraged technological advancement. "Is that what you had in mind?"

Dave smiled. "I wanted you to relax your mind," he said. "You're too stressed to be of much good to my patrons, so I wanted you to relax."

Penny smiled back. It was odd how relaxed she felt in his company. "And I'm sure that you had no ulterior motives," she said, wryly. Dave chuckled. "How do you think we will fight the war?"

Dave shook his head. "I think that for us the war is over," he said, deadpan. It had been a catchphrase on one of his entertainment shows. "It all hangs on the Thousand Families and Earth now. If we don't convince them…"

Penny made up her mind and reached for him, pulling him towards her for a kiss. Dave turned and kissed her back, his mouth exploring hers, even though there was a sort of curious dispassion in his act. Percival had wanted her to submit; Brent-Cochrane had wanted to mark his territory… but Dave's reactions were different.

And, somehow, having chosen to have sex with him herself made all the difference to her. She made love to him with all the passion and fury that she could muster.

Afterwards, she lay back in his arms and knew that he was right. For the moment, for her at least, the war was over.

Chapter Fifty

"The war is not over," Admiral Quintana insisted. The short portly CO of Sector 99 bristled with firm determination. "The loss of Camelot only pins them to one location."

Brent-Cochrane couldn't disagree with the logic. Admiral Quintana's sector fleet had paused long enough to stop at one of the relay stations — a precaution Brent-Cochrane had suggested — and discovered to their horror that Camelot had fallen. It was impossible to believe that the rebels possessed nearly ninety superdreadnaughts — it would have required capturing and crewing the squadrons from the seven nearest sectors — yet how had they produced such a massive missile salvo? He wanted to hate Percival for throwing away his ships, but how could anyone have anticipated such a meatgrinder?

Admiral Quintana carried on, ignoring his subordinate's concerns. "The rebels will have to maintain their fleet at Camelot or we will just walk in and repossess the system," he said. He'd been saying it again and again since they'd found out about the Battle of Camelot, as if he was desperately trying to convince Brent-Cochrane — or himself — of the truth of his words. "We will go in, prepared for such a huge salvo, and retake the system."

Brent-Cochrane chuckled darkly. "And how does one prepare for such a large salvo?"

"We get the hell out of its way," Admiral Quintana said, dryly. Brent-Cochrane laughed, more to himself than to anyone else. The only realistic defence against such an attack was not to be there when the missiles started to home in on one's position. Percival's superdreadnaughts hadn't had their flicker drives spun up and ready, probably concerned about wear and tear on the generators. It would be just like Percival to thank a victorious officer by demoting him for not taking care of his ships. "We jump into the system here" — his finger stabbed at the display — "and advance in normal space. The rebels will have plenty of time to see us coming, but we'll use the time to keep our drives humming, ready to spin up and jump us some distance from their target. And then we will see how many salvos they can fire."

Brent-Cochrane frowned. It wasn't bad logic, as logic went; indeed, if the massive salvos were a one-shot weapon, it should work quite well. The rebels might have added additional external racks to their superdreadnaughts, or perhaps they'd loaded missile pods onto freighters and smaller ships. No one had managed to get the missile pod concept to work, but if anyone could, the Geeks could do it.

Missile pods were always fouled by the drive field, yet… his mind tossed and turned the possibility around for a few seconds, before dismissing it. Someone with more experience of starships and weapons design would have to consider it.

He shook his head. "And if the rebels do happen to have eighty superdreadnaughts?"

"We back off fast and scream for help," Admiral Quintana said, shortly. Admitting defeat would be hard, but Brent-Cochrane knew that he had no connections to the Roosevelt Family. Whatever interest they had in Sector 117, it wouldn't affect Admiral Quintana's calculations — and he wouldn't care about wreaking havoc in the sector, if necessary. The Imperial Navy could turn the tables and keep the rebels from forming a government until a massive fleet of superdreadnaughts was assembled and sent to spank those who had believed the rebels and their promises. "I doubt that it will come to that."

"I hope you're right," Brent-Cochrane agreed. Watching sixteen superdreadnaughts get blown to plasma had shaken him more than he cared to admit. His own ship had been destroyed, along with commanders and crews he'd hand-picked for his own reasons. His scheming looked petty now, as if he'd been fiddling while the entire Empire burned around him. If it cost his career to end the rebellion now, it was worth it. "I really hope you're right."

"Chin up, young man," Admiral Quintana said. He was known to be pushing a hundred, although his career had seemingly stalled after deciding he liked being an Admiral and refusing to climb any higher. Or perhaps it was an act and there was some reason why Admiral Quintana wasn't being offered further promotion. The man had more connections than Brent-Cochrane had, certainly more than Percival had boasted. "The rebels will probably see us coming and flicker out, allowing us to take back the system and chase them back to the Beyond."

Brent-Cochrane shrugged. He doubted it. Whatever the rebels had done at Camelot, it hadn't been the act of cowards. What they'd done had to be a trick of some kind, although he was damned if he knew how they'd done it. If Percival had seen through it, if he'd had the nerve to avoid surrender… if it had been Percival who had surrendered. Brent-Cochrane's opinion of his former commander wasn't kind, yet he doubted that Percival would have surrendered, even on terms. Being a treacherous and small-minded man himself, he always thought of others as sharing the same unpleasant attributes.

But then… Admiral Quintana commanded no less than *three* squadrons of superdreadnaughts, twenty-seven ships, with over a hundred smaller ships backing them up. Whatever tricks the rebels

had up their sleeves, it wouldn't be enough to save them. Given time, Admiral Quintana could certainly crack Camelot's defences and punch through to the world below, and then the rebels on the surface would have no choice, but to surrender or die. There was no way the rebels could win.

He rubbed the back of his head as Admiral Quintana turned to the helmsman. "Jon" — he seemed to address all of his subordinates by their first names, a paternalistic conceit that Brent-Cochrane found annoying as hell — "how long until we can make the final jump."

"Twenty-seven minutes, Admiral," Jon said. "The drive is currently powered down and is repowering now."

"Good," Admiral Quintana said. He leaned back in his command chair, projecting an easy confidence and a slightly fussy image. Brent-Cochrane wasn't too impressed, although unlike Percival Admiral Quintana did at least have a working brain. But then… he'd been nothing more than an Administrator for the past ten years. Was he really up to commanding a fleet in combat? "Give me a countdown to the jump."

* * *

It was a curious law within the Imperial Navy that the larger the starship, the less open space it seemed to have for the crew. The mass of the superdreadnaught *Admiral Wilmslow* housed literally thousands of tubes, nooks and crannies, all known to the men and women who served on her lower decks. There, they could use them to snatch a quick rest, set up an illicit still — drunkenness was one of the problems on the lower decks — or any one of a hundred dubious undertakings. No inspection team could find most of the hidden places without a map, alerting those who used them to pack up and hide. The smarter commanding officers tolerated such behaviour as long as it didn't threaten the safety of the ship. Few argued; a crewman who showed up for duty drunk would be publically flogged for putting the entire crew in danger.

Senior Crewman Stanford Stoutjespyk opened a hidden compartment within the crossroads — the place where several tubes met, allowing the crawlers to stretch before climbing back into the tubes — and produced a counter-surveillance device. It would have upset Imperial Intelligence and the starship's Security Officer to know that he had it, but Stanford had obtained it on the black market and kept it hidden within the massive ship. Nothing short of dismantling the entire vessel would have located it, or so he told himself. If he'd been caught, he would have been unceremoniously discharged from

the service, at least in normal times. With a rebellion flaring out in the nearby sector, the chances were good that he would be charged with plotting mutiny and ejected from the nearest airlock.

He watched as his five guests came wriggling into the chamber. Three of them had the thin lanky forms of young crewmen, while one of them was clearly older and not in the best of physical shape. The fifth, a young woman who hid behind her friend, was not in any fit state to do her duty. She should never have been discharged from sickbay. Stanford's eyes narrowed as he saw the scars on her face. Her only crime had been to refuse to have sex with a Blackshirt, for which she had been soundly beaten and then raped. It had been the incident that had pushed him into contemplating open mutiny.

Stanford had served in the Imperial Navy for over twenty years, rising to Senior Crewman and holding the position for just under seven years. His job included the duty of taking care of the younger crew, including preventing bullying rings and harassment from growing out of hand, a task he took seriously. The superdreadnaught had been a happy ship — well, as happy as a superdreadnaught ever got — until the mutiny in the nearby sector and the assignment of the Blackshirts to the ship. He'd always gotten on well with the Marines, but the Blackshirts were lazy, undisciplined and uncomfortably paranoid. The rape had merely been the final straw.

He'd picked his allies from crewmen and women he'd known for several years, men and women he trusted… even though there was a risk that there was an informer among them. He couldn't see an Imperial Intelligence spy deciding to make himself unpopular among the crew, not when doing his job demanded having their confidence. It was a risk, but one he knew had to be taken. And if anyone was going to take it, it had to be him.

"Soon," he said, making a show of checking his wristcom, "this ship and the fleet will jump into the Camelot System and proceed to crush the rebellion. Do any of you feel that that is a good thing?"

There was no answer. They'd all *known* that the Empire was all-powerful, that resistance was futile, until the rebel message had burst into the ICN and downloaded itself into every terminal in the starship's home port. Public Information had issued a statement claiming that the rebel message was a hoax, one intended to cause unrest among the civilian population, but Stanford didn't believe them. They didn't understand the grapevine and how information was passed from crewman to crewman; when their commanding officer had picked up the word from Camelot, the crew had heard it too. The rebellion was real.

And that left them with a dilemma.

"I believe that if we defeat the rebels in the Camelot System, the

rebellion will be scattered," Stanford said. "I think that we have the firepower to do that, even if the rebels have more ships than our dear lords and masters believe. And if that happens, that will be the end of the rebellion and the end of our hopes for justice."

He waved a hand towards the poor girl. "We tolerate such crap because we have no choice," he added, "except we have a choice *now*. We have to act and seize this ship."

"I agree with your point," Senior Crewman Gonzalez said. "That leaves us with one problem." He tapped his belt meaningfully. "We have no weapons, no suits of armour… and no plan. And even if we take this ship, what about the others in the fleet?"

Senior Crewman Akkad was looking directly at Stanford. "You have a plan, don't you?"

"Yes," Stanford said. He didn't dare tell them that he had risked his life and liberty and contacted friends on the other ships, spreading the word as far as he dared. With one or more people on each ship plotting trouble, it should be possible to launch a mass mutiny without involving too many people at first. The only sign he'd had that things were going according to plan was the fact that the Blackshirts hadn't already arrived to arrest him. "I have a plan."

He smiled to himself. Ironically, if the superdreadnaught still carried its regulation two companies of Marines, it would have been impossible to take the ship. The Marines were trained for fighting onboard starships and probably would have been able to nip the rebellion in the bud. The Blackshirts, on the other hand, knew very little about operating on a superdreadnaught. They'd secured all of the main hatches, rightly enough, but they hadn't given any thought to the connecting tubes and passageways. The mutineers would have the freedom of the ship from the moment the mutiny began.

"I won't say much more at the moment," he added, checking his wristcom. "We need to gather a group to take the weapons locker and then take the starship's vital compartments… and then scream for help from the rebels."

Stanford took a breath. "I won't lie to you," he said. "The odds are very much against us. The chances are good that we will all die, but at least we will be dying for something, dying so that others might live. Our home planets might survive long enough to be free."

The thought was enough to keep him going, he told himself. His own homeworld had been settled by the Empire and swiftly turned into a clone of a thousand other worlds. There had been nothing there for a young lad without connections and he'd joined the Imperial Navy in the hopes of seeing some action. It hadn't worked out as he had planned, but if he survived the next few hours perhaps it wouldn't all be in vain. He'd seen enough to understand just why his

homeworld hadn't been allowed to develop in its own way. It was all about power.

He gathered four teams of crewmen and explained, quickly, what he had in mind. Four objected and were rapidly subdued, knocked to the ground, tied up and left in the hidden compartment. None of them had been on his list of potential spies and indeed, they probably weren't spies, they were just afraid. He apologised to them personally and promised that when the mutiny was over, they would be freed. The remainder of the groups went along with his plan.

By the time the starship jumped into the Camelot System, he told himself, they would be ready.

An ally on the bridge had granted him access to the live feed from the datanet, a stream of information that was normally only available to officers. It showed that the Admiral intended to take them into the system some distance from the planet, something that puzzled Stanford, but it didn't matter what the Admiral had in mind. Stanford was trying to organise a mutiny at the last second and he needed all the time he could get. As the dull throbbing of the flicker drive grew louder, he found himself smiling. This, at last, was real action.

His grin only grew wider as he saw his two volunteers. They glared daggers at him.

"Don't worry," Stanford said. He sobered. The two volunteers had the most dangerous task in the mutiny… and everything depended upon them. "We will be there to back you up."

* * *

Brent-Cochrane watched, concealing his impatience, as the Admiral checked in with each and every station personally. Normally, the duty officers would do that and report to the Admiral, but Admiral Quintana seemed to feel the urge to micromanage. He hoped that the Admiral wasn't going to waste his time by assigning counter-missile targets personally. No human mind could handle the rapid calculations involved.

"All stations report ready, sir," the CIC officer reported, finally. "We are ready to jump."

"Good," Admiral Quintana said. He took his chair and sat down, placing his fingers in his lap, as if he didn't have a care in the world. "Helm, you may begin jump preparation."

"Aye, sir," the helmsman said. His hands tapped a combination into the keyboard. "All ships, this is the flag; jump in two minutes. I say again, jump in two minutes. Slave all control systems to the flagship."

Brent-Cochrane concealed his amusement. Few commanders would enjoy having their ship slaved to another ship, whatever the reason. It was the only way to handle a mass jump without having the fleet scattered, yet it took some control out of their hands. He doubted that Admiral Quintana would listen to any complaints. No micromanager could endure being upbraided by his subordinates.

"All ships have checked in," the helmsman said, a moment later. "The flicker drives are powering up. Jump in ninety seconds; I say again, jump in ninety seconds."

The big timer appeared on the display and began to count down. Brent-Cochrane felt the old excitement welling up within him, even though he was not in command. He had tried to convince the Admiral to give him a squadron, or even a ship, but Admiral Quintana had been resolute. No clients of Admiral Percival would be honoured by him. Brent-Cochrane had tried to explain that he wasn't one of Percival's clients, yet the Admiral refused to believe him — or perhaps it was just an excuse. Perhaps he didn't want to risk upsetting his subordinate Commodores.

Brent-Cochrane gasped as the jump shock hit him. It always surprised him, even though he had been expecting it. The display flickered and reset itself, revealing that they were floating within the Camelot System. No starships lay in wait for them. The rebels, thankfully, had not added precognition to their list of surprises.

"All ships, this is the Admiral," Admiral Quintana said. His face had settled into a frown as he studied the display. "Ahead of us are rebels who have seen fit to launch an uprising against the Empire, the Empire that is all that stands between us and disaster. We will advance on the planet and put the rebellion down with all necessary force. They will be crushed for their pains."

He clicked off the general broadcast and looked over at the helmsman. "The fleet will advance," he ordered. "Take us directly towards the planet."

Chapter Fifty-One

"Admiral," the tactical officer said, very quietly. "I am detecting three squadrons of superdreadnaughts, two squadrons of battlecruisers, three squadrons…"

Colin listened as the words echoed in the air, heralding doom for his rebellion. Percival had finally called for help and reinforcements had arrived, only two weeks after Camelot had fallen and Colin had become the master of Sector 117. The chances were good that it would be a very short mastery; even with the arsenal ships, defeating the advancing force was not going to be easy.

He studied the display, keeping his expression as calm and composed as possible. Showing his subordinates his shock and dismay would have been unhelpful at best, disastrous at work. His crew was working away at their consoles, confident that Colin would find a way to get them out of this fix. Only a day ago, he'd overhead two crewmen refer to him as the Old Man and he'd thought that his heart would burst with pride. It hadn't been a conventional ascent to Admiral's rank, but he'd made it and he was accepted by his crew. Now all of his dreams were threatening to turn into dust.

The enemy fleet had actually jumped into the system some distance from the planet, so far away that part of Colin wondered if they'd had a major navigational error. It would have been believable if the fleet had arrived scattered all over the system, or if they'd been using commercial-grade computers and drives, but these were Imperial Navy warships. The enemy commander had flickered into the precise location he'd designated and Colin had a sneaking suspicion that he knew why. The enemy superdreadnaughts would have more than long enough to recharge their flicker drives before they entered missile range. They might not have deduced the true nature of the arsenal ships, but they had certainly deduced that most of the superdreadnaughts orbiting Camelot simply didn't exist.

"We are picking up a transmission from the enemy fleet," the communications officer said tonelessly. "They're transmitting it to the entire system."

"Let's hear it," Colin said. He doubted that the enemy commander's words would make any difference. They all knew what the Empire would do to them if they were captured alive. "Put it through on speakers."

"…Is Admiral Quintana, Commanding Officer of Sector 99," a voice said. It sounded old, but determined. Colin had never met Admiral Quintana, but he knew him by reputation as a fussy old man with a mind like a steel trap. It didn't bode well for the coming battle.

An Imperial Navy Commander with powerful connections and a refusal to be tricked or bullied into making mistakes would be bad enough, but Admiral Quintana also had the firepower advantage. “I speak now to those who have lifted their hands against the Empire.

“If you stand down your ships and surrender without a fight, I am empowered to offer you transport to a stage-one colony, rather than execution or a penal world. Your rebellion will be forgiven, if not forgotten. If you refuse my kind offer, I will advance against your ships and defences and hammer them flat. The Empire cannot tolerate open insurrection. You have ten minutes to decide.”

Colin smiled. Without using the flicker drive, it would take the fleet at least forty minutes to approach Camelot and enter weapons range. There was no reason to add such a deadline, unless the enemy commander hoped that it would encourage a mutiny that would overthrow the original mutineers. Colin, for himself at least, had no intention of accepting the offer. Even if he trusted Admiral Quintana to keep his word — and the Admiral’s superiors to back his play, which he didn’t — it would be a betrayal of everyone who had died in the war to just surrender and allow the Empire to dump him on a colony world. He kept his hands folded in his lap, rather than reaching for the pistol at his belt, trusting his people not to shoot him in the back. No bullet or plasma burst cracked through his skull.

“The message is repeating,” the communications officer said. Colin nodded, sourly. There was no way they could jam it, not with such a powerful broadcast. Besides, that would suggest that the rebel leadership was worried… and that would never do. “They’re alternating the source of the transmission.”

“Curious,” Colin said. The enemy fleet had to be more worried than they were admitting, particularly if they were trying to hide their flagship. He wondered, absently, which ship it was, but the fleet database they’d captured on Camelot didn’t name Admiral Quintana’s flagship. He would normally command his sector from an orbiting battle station and only transfer his flag to a flagship when commanding an operation in person. “Open a channel.”

“Aye, sir,” the communications officer said. “Channel open, sir.”

“Admiral Quintana, this is Admiral Walker,” Colin said. “We will not surrender. Join us; help us to reform the Empire… or stay out of our way. We will not be denied.”

He hit his console, hoping — praying — that the enemy commander would listen to reason. Colin was a tactical expert and he knew that the battle was going to be bloody. By keeping his ships on station in orbit, rather than sailing out to challenge Admiral Quintana directly, he would be combining the firepower of his starships and the captured orbital battle stations. In theory, that was enough firepower

to stand off even three squadrons of superdreadnaughts, but in practice half of his battle stations would be unable to engage. And Admiral Quintana had been smart enough to come up with a simple way of countering the arsenal ships. Would he try to enter the planet's gravity field or would he simply content himself with a long-range missile duel? There was no way to know.

"Send a signal to all ships," he ordered. "Hold your ground and they will break over us."

"Aye, sir," the communications officer said.

"And add; whatever happens here, we will not be forgotten as long as the human race endures," Colin said. Even as he spoke the words, he wondered if he was telling the truth. The Empire had buried more history than he had ever understood, until he'd read some of the forbidden history texts on Jackson's Folly or out in the Beyond. The generation that controlled the past controlled the future… and the Empire had worked hard to ensure that its history was the only one people remembered. It made him wonder how many great battles, or true leaders of men, or cowardly traitors had been buried, without anyone remembering their names or faces. "What we have started will live on."

* * *

"He refused to surrender," Brent-Cochrane said, with some amusement. He'd been surprised to discover that Admiral Quintana believed that the rebels would surrender as soon as they saw his fleet, even though they had fought savagely even when his own force had mouse-trapped them at Greenland. Whatever else one could say about the rebels, they were hardly cowards, not when a coward would never have dared to rebel. "I predicted that, didn't I?"

"Indeed you did," Admiral Quintana agreed, without malice. He looked over towards the helmsman. "Continue the advance towards the planet."

Brent-Cochrane settled back into his seat and tried to relax. The fleet had launched an entire swarm of probes as soon as it had entered the system, quartering space to ensure that the rebels weren't trying to sneak a cloaked fleet in on top of them. It should have been impossible for the fleet to be surprised — there was nothing subtle or particularly clever about the operational plan — yet he knew better than to underestimate the rebels. And Admiral Quintana, for all of his concern, was treating them as a conventional opponent, rebels who would surrender as soon as they smelt the first whiff of grapeshot.

It was hard to gain reliable sensor images at such a range, but the

rebel superdreadnaughts appeared to be remaining in orbit, rather than heading out beyond the gravity shadow and flickering away. Brent-Cochrane wondered just what they had in mind. The data suggested that the rebels were going to get brutally hurt even if they won the fight — and there was no way that they could survive a war of attrition. Maybe they intended to make a stand, or maybe *all* of the superdreadnaughts were drones and the rebel fleet had flickered out days ago, pre-recording the message for the Admiral's benefit.

He shook his head as the timer continued to tick down towards missile range. Soon enough, they would *know* what they were facing. Why worry about it now?

* * *

Private Andy Barcoo *hated* the superdreadnaught. He hated the constant throbbing noise in the background, the tiny metallic passageways and — most of all — the hatred he saw in the eyes of the crew. The drug treatments that all Blackshirts received once they passed through Basic Training made them hypersensitive to slights and bad treatment and he had already put two members of the crew in sickbay before the Sergeant — a real asshole if ever there was one — had reprimanded him severely. His jaw still hurt where the Sergeant's reprimand had connected, threatening to knock out a few of his teeth. The Blackshirts healed quickly — another effect of the drugs — but the pain lingered on. Andy had begged for some additional painkillers, yet the Sergeant had — instead — assigned him to guarding the armoury. It wouldn't do for any of the superdreadnaught's crew to get their hands on weapons. They were just one step up from occupied people in Andy's view and everyone knew that occupied people lied all the time.

He held himself rigid, even though there was no sign of the Sergeant. Obedience had been beaten into him at the Training Centre, to the point where he literally could not disobey an order, unless it contradicted the regulations that had also been hammered into his head. Andy had been on campaigns where the Blackshirts had been empowered to do whatever they wanted to the local population — and had been ordered to have as much fun as they could — but being on the superdreadnaught was boring. He was uneasily aware that only a thin wall of metal separated him from the cold vacuum of space.

Andy looked up as he heard someone heading down the corridor towards his position. He'd been ordered not to actually block the passageway, only to prevent anyone from gaining access to the armoury without permission, and so he stepped back just before the

person turned the corner and walked right towards him. She was a crewwoman — there were no female Blackshirts — wearing a shipsuit that had been opened to reveal the tops of her breasts and expose just enough of her that he wanted to see more. Andy felt a sudden wave of lust burning through his mind, interfering with rational thought, yet another side-effect of the treatments he'd undergone. If he hadn't been ordered to remain where he was, he would have reached for the girl and drawn her to him. As she drew closer, he was suddenly very aware of her perfume, a smell that seemed to trigger glands he hadn't known he had. He wanted her desperately.

"We're going into battle soon," the girl said. Her voice was rich and very feminine. "I need to relieve myself first" her tongue licked her lips, revealing precisely what she meant by relieve herself — "and I was wondering if you could help."

She leaned forward, giving him a magnificent view of her breasts, and put her arms around him. He bent down to kiss her, pushing his lips against hers, yet just as he pushed his tongue into her mouth he felt something get pushed against the back of his neck. Andy realised, in a moment of horror, that he'd been tricked and threw the girl hard against the bulkhead, but it was already too late. The world was dimming around him as the drug took effect and he collapsed onto the deck. Darkness swallowed him a moment later.

* * *

"That bastard needed to brush his teeth properly," Crewwoman Singe said, in disgust. She spat on the bulkhead before kicking the unconscious Blackshirt in the groin. "Where the hell did he learn to kiss?"

"I doubt that it's on the curriculum at wherever they're trained," Stanford said. He took a moment to check the Blackshirt and then turned to the armoury. The Blackshirts had clearly felt that only one guard had been required — there were two armoury compartments on the ship, both of which were being raided — and on first glance it was easy to see why. The hatch was made of battle steel and should have been resistant to anything short of a heavy laser cannon or fission beam. The superdreadnaughts, however, had emergency systems that could be used to unlock a hatch manually if necessary, allowing them access to the armoury. "Take his gun and use his cuffs… belay that; undress the bastard first and then use his cuffs to secure him."

He opened the small inspection hatch and peered into the tiny maintenance compartment. The moment he started to fiddle with it, an alarm should sound on the bridge, which meant that if his ally

hadn't managed to bypass the system successfully, they were going to be in a fight right from the start. He looked down at the naked Blackshirt, wondering if he'd been the one who had raped a crewwoman, before reaching into the compartment and altering the chips. There was a hiss and the hatch started to glide open. Two of his crewmen caught it and pushed it all the way back, allowing his team to swarm inside.

"Take the rifles and the grenades," he ordered. They'd all been given basic weapons training, but none of them had any experience with powered armour. If they'd had a few Marines to help them… but the Marines had been off-loaded and no one knew what had happened to them. "Make sure you take the communicators and switch them to a private band."

The first team collected their weapons and headed out of the compartment, as they had planned. The second team would remain and guard the armoury, using it to arm the crewmen while hopefully denying its contents to the loyalists. The other teams would get their own weapons and then carry out their part of the plan. He watched as the first team opened a hatch into the tubes and headed out, unseen, towards the engineering compartment. Once they were in place, they would force their way inside and take control.

"Pass me the uniform," Stanford ordered, and started to don the Blackshirt's outfit. It wasn't a good fit, but Imperial Navy uniforms rarely were at first and he assumed that that was true of the Blackshirts as well. He found a shiny surface and inspected himself. He looked alarmingly realistic.

"You look terrifying, boss," one of the crewmen said. "You'd better mind that we don't shoot you by accident."

Stanford nodded. He'd considered the possibility when he'd first come up with the plan, but he'd deemed that the risk was worth it. The Blackshirts might be completely unfamiliar with the superdreadnaught, yet they still had more weapons and far more experience in using them. If they could deal with their commanding officers in one fell swoop, it might be worth any risk. Besides, he had no intention of allowing anyone else to take the risk.

"If anyone does, I'll have him cleaning toilets for the next millennium," he threatened, as he checked the Blackshirt-issue plasma pistol. Unlike the standard weapons, it included a reader that checked for a Blackshirt implant before it would fire. Stanford knew how to remove it, but as he examined the pistol he was amused to discover that its former owner already had, even though he'd probably been told not to even think about it. It wasn't too great a surprise. The systems did tend to fail and that would be disastrous in combat. "Jake; you have command here, but stay in touch. Don't fuck up."

“I won’t,” Jake promised. “Good luck, mate.”

Stanford nodded and collected his two escorts. With the Blackshirts taking over security roles on the starship, they had developed a habit of arresting crewmen for various offenses and demanding a bribe before they were set free. His two escorts would look like crewmen who had been unable, or unwilling, to pay the bribe and would be spending the next few hours in the brig before their salaries were docked or some other punishment was assigned. As long as they kept their weapons out of sight, they should be fine.

It felt odd walking through the starship in a Blackshirt uniform. The crew they encountered, the ones who were not involved in the mutiny, shied away from him, the fear in their eyes sending chills down his spine. The men were bad enough, but the women were *terrified* and found ways to get away from him, even though he wasn’t even leering at them. It tore at his heart as he pushed his two charges into Marine Country and through the hatch leading into the main security compartment. From the small compartment, the Marines could have handled any security or behaviour problem on the starship.

“You,” a voice demanded. Stanford half-turned to see a Blackshirt officer bearing down on him, his face set in a permanent expression of anger. “Why have you brought those pieces of human waste here?”

Stanford could have made an excuse, but the more he talked, the less likely it would be that anyone would fall for his disguise. “For support,” he said, and lifted his weapon. He took aim before the Blackshirt could react and shot him through the head. His two companions drew their own weapons and plunged into the security compartment. “Kill them!”

Forty seconds later, every Blackshirt in Marine Country was dead.

Chapter Fifty-Two

"They're approaching missile range," the tactical officer said. "They're launching additional probes."

Colin nodded. The decoys had formed up with the rest of his ships, creating an impression of an entire fleet of superdreadnaughts waiting for Admiral Quintana and his force. The Admiral was probably trying to sort out the real ships from the decoys, a task the Geeks had sworn blind would be impossible. Colin wouldn't have put money on it. In his experience, the word 'impossible' was only a reflection of the unknown.

"Keep countering them," he ordered. The timer was ticking down to the point where he would have to open fire… and then, once it became clear he could only launch one massive salvo, Admiral Quintana would understand what he had done. "And bring up the point defence. I want them ready to engage at a moment's notice."

* * *

"Two minutes to missile range," the tactical officer reported. "The enemy is scanning us and launching sensor probes."

"Probably trying to pin down the command ship," Admiral Quintana commented. Brent-Cochrane couldn't disagree. "It won't get them anywhere."

He smiled. The Imperial Navy's standard practice was to illuminate the flagship in order that all should know the greatness of the commanding officer. Against an opponent who could throw such massive salvos in one shot, it was nothing more than suicide. Admiral Quintana had kept his flagship stepped down so that it was indistinguishable from the remainder of the fleet, while using pinpoint lasers to send orders from ship to ship. The rebels would only be able to destroy the flagship through sheer luck. Luck had been on their side, Brent-Cochrane acknowledged, but it would take a vast amount of luck to get out of this one. They wouldn't get that lucky break, he promised himself, whatever it took.

"Prepare to fire once we enter weapons range," Admiral Quintana ordered. He smiled down at the display. "And then we will see what they have up their sleeves."

An alarm chimed. "Admiral," the Security Officer said, "I have lost contact with Marine… ah, with the Blackshirt CO. The link to their compartment failed."

Brent-Cochrane stared in horror. It couldn't be a coincidence. The

rebels had made contact with others at Sector 99 — perhaps they'd had cells in place long before the mutiny at Jackson's Folly — and the cells were now launching a mutiny of their own. The entire superdreadnaught might be under enemy control.

"Sir," he said, "we have to lock the ship down, now!"

Admiral Quintana turned and gave him a puzzled look. "There is a rebel team onboard this ship," Brent-Cochrane snarled. Part of him knew that if he was wrong, it would be the end of his career, but if he was right… his career didn't matter, not against the danger of the rebellion spreading out of control. "We have to secure the ship before all hell breaks loose."

"Check with the other sections," Admiral Quintana ordered. He didn't sound as if he believed Brent-Cochrane; after all, there had never been a successful mutiny on a superdreadnaught. But then, every superdreadnaught had an entire Marine Regiment allocated to provide internal security, not hated and despised Blackshirts. "I want them all to check in now."

They waited while the communications officer ran through the checks. Several compartments, including two other security positions, refused to respond. Others reported that everything was normal, without any signs of trouble at all. Even Admiral Quintana was convinced that something was badly wrong. He sounded the internal security alarm and ordered a lockdown. All though the ship, blast doors swung down, isolating each and every compartment. The mutineers would be split up into hundreds of separate cells, where they could be mopped up easily.

"Get in touch with the troop transports," Admiral Quintana said. "I want them to shuttle over an entire regiment of Blackshirts."

"Aye, sir," the communications officer said. He worked his console for a long moment. "Sir, several other starships are reporting onboard trouble as well."

Brent-Cochrane cursed. No wonder the rebels were holding their ground. They *knew* that their allies were planning to take the superdreadnaughts intact and deliver them to the rebellion. They were just waiting to walk in and claim their new ships!

Admiral Quintana clearly agreed. "Launch missiles," he ordered. Brent-Cochrane was fairly sure that no other commander had ever opened an engagement with enemy ships while there was a mutiny underway, but with the lockdown in place they should be able to regain control. "You are to continue firing until the enemy force has been destroyed."

The superdreadnaught shuddered as she launched her first mighty salvo.

* * *

"They're firing at extreme range," the tactical officer said, as the display sparkled with a swarm of deadly red icons. Colin didn't need anyone to tell him that the superdreadnaughts had flushed their external racks. Everything in the fleet larger than a destroyer had contributed to that massive salvo. There were so many missiles that even the Geek-designed systems would have trouble controlling them all. "They will enter point defence range in six minutes and counting."

Colin nodded. The problem with firing at extreme range, as any tactician would admit, was that it gave the defenders plenty of time to plot intercept solutions and plan their defence. Admiral Quintana had side-stepped that problem with the overwhelming use of brute force; no defence, not even the combined datanet protecting the planet, could hope to stop them all. And, worse, as long as the enemy force remained out of the gravity shadow, Colin could throw enough missiles at them to shatter their fleet and they would just flicker away.

"Deploy missile pods," he ordered. "You are cleared to engage with station-mounted weapons only."

The tactical officer hesitated. "Sir…?"

"Do it," Colin snapped. He understood the officer's confusion, but there was no time for a debate. The stations packed far more missiles than his superdreadnaughts, or even the arsenal ships. They could fire for far longer without shooting themselves dry… and besides, firing only those weapons might suggest to the enemy commander that *all* of the superdreadnaughts were decoys. "Bring the point defence online and start tracking the enemy missiles."

He settled back in his command chair. The enemy missile swarm suggested that they hadn't settled on a final target set, but with so many missiles it wasn't an immediate priority. They could afford to drench his defences and see what shot back. The arsenal ships, for all their undoubted use, possessed no point defence worth a damn. Once the enemy realised what they were and started targeting them, Camelot would be lost along with the arsenal ships.

* * *

Stanford cursed as the rumble of the missile launch echoed through the superdreadnaught. "They're on to us," he said. He'd been working the console — having used the palm-imprint of one of the dead Blackshirts to make it work — only to discover that its functions were limited. The Blackshirts hadn't really been aware of the capabilities of their tools. He'd managed to rig a system so that the

Blackshirt command network was dumped into his small portable terminal. “I think we’d better get out of here.”

He keyed the console and brought up the lockdown data, examining it quickly and comparing it with the known Blackshirt locations. Jamming the Blackshirt command network had been easy enough; the surviving senior Blackshirt would literally be unable to take command of his force. It was a shame he couldn’t trigger the remainder of the internal weapons, but he had to settle for jamming them before taking a key-card from one of the bodies. The senior officers hadn’t realised it, but they’d given the Blackshirts the ability to give their people access authority, authority Stanford had been able to usurp. The lockdown would impede the enemy more than it would impede him.

“Come on,” he ordered, picking up his weapon and heading for the hatch. It had sealed, of course, but a wave of the card in front of the sensor opened it up. Stanford keyed his radio, passing on the data and then a final wave of instructions. “Move in on your targets and take them out now.”

He muttered a curse under his breath as he started to run, pausing only to open the locked hatches and meet up with other allies. Time wasn’t on their side. All it would take would be the Admiral deciding to blow the ship and they would all die, without knowing if the rebellion had been successful or not. Twice, they encountered small groups of Blackshirts and shot their way through them, the Blackshirts recognising his uniform and hesitating just long enough for the mutineers to get in the first shot.

“We need to move quickly,” he said, once they all met up in one of the smaller corridors, just outside the CIC. He checked his terminal and swore. Now that the enemy was alert to their operations, the Blackshirts were moving and trying to recapture vital compartments. It was taking them longer than it should — Stanford had taken the precaution of wiping all access permissions apart from the ones he had created himself — but they were moving. The superdreadnaught shuddered again as it unleashed another salvo, adding a new danger to the whole enterprise. They might be killed by their own side. “And we also need to take the CIC intact. No shooting unless they fire first.”

There was a low rumble of agreement.

* * *

“But how are they doing this?”

Brent-Cochrane blinked at the tone in the Admiral’s voice. The Admiral had been speaking with the Chief Engineer when armed men

had burst in behind him, firing live weapons in *Engineering*, of all places! The Engineer's face had vanished from the display; a moment later, the communications link had failed completely. Engineering had been added to the list of compartments that had somehow been taken by the mutineers.

The ship rocked sharply as a missile slipped through the point defence to slam against the shields. It was only a single warhead, but the battle stations were giving almost as good as they were getting and it was only a matter of time before more slipped through. The rebel superdreadnaughts weren't firing, leaving him to wonder if they were *real*… or if the rebels had decided to abandon Camelot in the face of superior force. None of the superdreadnaughts were using point defence either.

"They clearly planned carefully," Brent-Cochrane said. Imperial Intelligence was supposed to have placed even more agents in the crew, yet they'd heard nothing. A paranoid thought flashed through his mind. Was it simple incompetence… or something more sinister? Was Imperial Intelligence, for whatever demented reason made sense to a spook's mind, working *with* the rebels? "I think we may need to consider…"

A green icon flashed on the display. "Sir," the tactical officer said, in a tone of a man who hoped that his superiors would not blame him for the disaster, "*Admiral Owen* has been destroyed."

Brent-Cochrane blinked. The superdreadnaught hadn't been under heavy fire, for she had been in the rear of the formation. There was nothing to explain the ship's destruction, unless… he tapped his console and pulled up the records. It was clear as soon as he reviewed the live feed from the drones flying alongside the fleet. The superdreadnaught's commander had triggered the self-destruct. His ship had to have been on the verge of falling to the enemy.

"Sir," Brent-Cochrane said. A new light flashed on the display. The rebels — the mutineers — were trying to assert control of the ship from engineering. If they succeeded, the CIC could be sealed off and rendered harmless. "We need to trigger the self-destruct ourselves."

Another console flashed. The flicker drive was powering down. "Impossible," Admiral Quintana snapped. "I could not…"

He broke off as the sound of firing suddenly echoed in the distance. It took Brent-Cochrane a moment to realise that it was coming from the direct connection to the Blackshirts on duty outside the CIC. They were under attack. It wouldn't be long until the mutineers penetrated to CIC and took over the ship.

"Sir," Brent-Cochrane repeated. "You need to trigger the codes…"

Something flashed in the air. A knife appeared in Admiral Quintana's eye, penetrating right into his brain. Brent-Cochrane lifted

his weapon slowly as he saw the communications officer, one arm outstretched in a throwing pose. The treacherous officer had made it impossible to destroy the ship! He shot the communications officer as the hatch burst inwards and turned, firing towards the mutineers. He was still firing when four heavy blows slammed into his body and he collapsed into darkness.

* * *

Stanford watched the Commodore's body fall to the ground and then looked around the CIC. Apart from the lone man, no one offered any resistance and it was easy to secure them and leave them for later attention. The chances were good that at least some of them would want to join the rebellion, but there was no time to test their loyalties now.

"Get in touch with the rebels," he ordered, as he took the command chair. He checked his terminal and realised, to his relief, that the mutiny had secured all of the important locations. The remaining Blackshirts were isolated and could be dealt with at leisure. "Tell them that we want to surrender."

He brought up the datanet console and checked the IFF signatures of the other superdreadnaughts. One of the ships was gone, he realised, but fourteen others had altered their IFF signals, confirming that they had been taken over by the mutineers. That might change, he knew, but for the moment they were secure. Hell, the loyalist superdreadnaughts might be on the verge of switching sides too.

"Quit firing at the rebels and prepare to fire on the loyalist ships," he added. He hadn't placed anyone on the smaller ships, knowing that if they took the superdreadnaughts more or less intact, they would be able to dictate terms to the other ships. The chances of being betrayed grew exponentially the more people he added to the conspiracy. "Get me a direct laser link to the friendly ships."

He checked the call log as he waited for acknowledgement and smiled. Only two superdreadnaughts seemed to be completely free of mutineers, far more than he had dared hope. The remainder were either in the hands of his allies or being disputed. The Blackshirt transports were demanding orders from the Admiral. It seemed that he had ordered them to prepare to dispatch troops to the various superdreadnaughts, but then they'd lost contact with him.

"Detach yourself from the command datanet and form a new one," he ordered, once he had made contact with his allies. Another superdreadnaught had fallen, leaving only ten as loyalist ships. The loyalists were panicking, uncertain of what to do. "I'm trying to talk to

the rebels now.”

* * *

The first sign Colin had that all was not well with the enemy side was when one of their superdreadnaughts exploded for no apparent reason. It had been easy to tell that the ship had self-destructed — he knew perfectly well that his fortresses hadn’t fired on it, or at least not enough to destroy her — yet why? Ships did not explode for no apparent reason. Even a fused flicker drive would have merely rendered the ship unable to flicker away.

“Admiral, we’re picking up a message from the enemy flagship,” the communications officer said. “They’re saying that they had a mutiny and they want our support!”

Colin didn’t hesitate. It could have been a trick, or a trap, but not even the Empire would sacrifice an entire superdreadnaught just to bait a trap.

“General signal to the fleet,” he ordered. “The battle line will advance to support the friendly ships.”

He keyed another console and linked into the Marine command net. “Neil,” he said, “you can start getting your shuttles ready. I have a number of ships that you need to board.”

* * *

“They’re coming out to support us,” Stanford said, in relief. It had occurred to him that the rebels might not believe him, even if he had taken the superdreadnaught out of action. Two other superdreadnaughts had fallen to mutineers, leaving the remaining ships isolated and unable to act. The rebel crews had targeted them with energy weapons, just in case. He keyed his console and linked into the loyalist command net. They might not have known it, but the Admiral’s access permissions allowed him to go anywhere. “This is the rebel commander.”

He paused, choosing his words carefully. “We have you targeted with our energy weapons,” he said. “You cannot bring up your flicker drives in time to escape if we open fire. You can open fire yourself, but we will tear your ships apart at point-blank range. You cannot escape. All you can do is die bravely.

“If you surrender, you will be treated honourably,” he added. “You have two minutes to reply.”

The response was immediate. “They’re signalling that they want

to surrender," one of his allies reported. He'd worked in the communications department, even if he'd never served on the bridge. "It's over."

* * *

It took an hour before Colin was sure, but once there were armed Marines on each of the new starships and their loyalist crews had been removed, he allowed himself a sigh of relief. He had hoped that the message he'd sent would inspire others to revolt against the Empire, yet he had never expected… the mutinies had come in the nick of time. It hadn't been planned from the start, although it would never be told that way. He smiled at the thought. The reports he would send back to Earth would claim that it had all been organised months in advance. The Empire would look as if it was composed of fools and if a few Imperial Intelligence officers paid for it with their heads… well, it was all to the good.

He stood in what had once been Admiral Percival's private viewing blister and stared out at the new fleet. The rebellion had a real fleet now, one capable of challenging a second sector fleet or anything short of Home Fleet itself. The Empire would need to pull together a new fleet to destroy the rebellion and that would take time. Perhaps too much time; after all, the Empire was vast. The Imperial Navy was scattered over thousands of light years.

Colin looked out across the stars, thinking and planning.

The Empire had no idea what was coming its way.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Commander Fox stared down into the water hole and prayed that the shape deep within the dark waters was a fish, rather than one of the nastier creatures that inhabited Garstang. Life on the penal world wasn't as bad as he had feared — they'd been lucky enough to make contact with one of the groups that had refused to leave, a religious group that had been exiled because the Empire wanted their land — yet it was dangerous. He couldn't close his eyes for a moment before something else would emerge from the water or the ground and try to kill him.

He stabbed down with his spear and smiled in relief as he punched right through the creature's skin, sending a cloud of blood drifting into the water. Moving swiftly, he pulled the spear and the weird alien fish out of the water and started to run, while behind him the water hole seemed to explode as nastier creatures — drawn by the blood — exploded into the open. The entire water hole wouldn't be safe for days. He was still running when he saw the light in the sky.

There had been no transports or supply capsules since the day the rebels had abandoned him and his men on the planet, yet now there was a single drop capsule falling through the atmosphere. As he watched, it deployed parachutes and started to steer itself towards the nearest settlement, the one he'd found and joined. He turned and started to run towards where the capsule was landing, intent on discovering who or what was in it first. The rebel leadership had doubtless been caught and arrested by now — and sentencing them to the penal world would have been more than appropriate. The capsule came down gently and touched down, the parachutes falling over the conical shape, right on the edge of a sandy depression. Fox swore as he kept running. The people in the capsule had no idea just how much danger was all around them. How could they? The Imperial Survey Report contained no such details.

The capsule was already opening as he came running up, praying that his footsteps hadn't attracted the attention of something bigger and nastier than he was. A head stuck out, sniffed the air, and withdrew just as quickly. Fox had to smile, even though it wasn't really funny; all worlds had their own particular smell, but the penal worlds smelt worse than most. After all, if they were rated as more than marginally habitable, they wouldn't have been turned into cheap dumping grounds for convicts, rebels, terrorists and people whose only sin was being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Empire had no shortage of other ways to kill its enemies.

"Don't go near the sand," he shouted. Once, running so hard

would have left him out of breath, yet now it seemed almost effortless to run so far. The planet had been good for his health, if nothing else; only the quick and the sharp survived on the penal world. “Get out of the capsule and walk away from the sand”

The hatch opened again and a single overweight person climbed out. He was wearing a grey convict’s suit, yet Fox recognised him without any trouble at all. It had been Admiral Percival who had assigned him to the penal world in the first place; the Admiral looked pallid and unhealthy, yet it was unmistakably him. He was shaking and shivering, although it was warm and damp air, and looked as if he’d had a very hard time. The truth dawned on Fox as he reached the Admiral’s side; the rebels were winning the war! He took a glance inside the capsule and found a small package of supplies, but little else. Fox picked them up, slung them over his back, and started to pull the Admiral away from the sand. Judging from the smell leaking out of the capsule, the Admiral had thrown up during the descent.

“That’s mine,” the Admiral protested, as Fox pulled him along. He had to be away from the sand before something very nasty came swimming through the ground and emerged to attack them. “You thief, you…”

Fox started to obey and then stopped. Why should he obey? It wasn’t as if the Admiral was still an Admiral. He wouldn’t be here if he hadn’t been abandoned by his patrons and condemned to a life of servitude. Fox felt his mouth falling open into an unpleasant smile. The Admiral could be killed, right now, and no one would give a damn.

“I hope there’s something good to eat,” the Admiral continued, unaware of Fox’s inner thoughts. “I haven’t had a good meal since…”

It was his tone that finally drove Fox over the edge. Once they were safely away from the sand, he turned around and slammed the flat of his palm into the Admiral’s chest. Percival doubled over, choking and coughing, retching as he fell to the ground. Real physical pain would have been a rarity to him, Fox knew; who would have dared to lay a finger on his body, no matter how obnoxious he decided to be?

“Shut up and listen,” Fox snarled. The Admiral had curled into a ball, peering up at Fox as if he were on the verge of collapse. He’d been told that some convicts never did recover from the shock of discovering the true nature of their world, red in tooth and claw. “Your former rank means nothing! You have no way of contacting your friends or allies! You are alone and dependent on our good will. If you work hard, we will take you in and allow you to stay with us. If you don’t want to do that, just stay here or wander off and something will be along to kill you sooner or later. The choice is yours.”

He walked off, not looking back. He hadn't been joking. If the Admiral joined the community, he would work as hard as anyone else or be expelled into the wilderness, where he would surely die or join the remaining bandits — no, they'd probably kill and eat him on sight. He had enough blubber on him, even after his period of imprisonment, to feed an entire bandit gang for a few days.

After a moment, Percival picked himself up and tottered after him.

* * *

"This meeting is hereby called to order," Hester Hyman said. She was standing at one end of a long table, made from Old Earth wood. The Popular Front's council had transferred itself to Camelot as soon as the second round of mutinies had saved the world from recapture, determined to build a new political structure within Sector 117 and further afield. "We have come a very long way."

Hannelore Ellicott-Chatham tuned her out, aware that Jason Cordova — sitting next to her — was doing the same. The first day of any political meeting was sure to be nothing, but boring, even though the representatives had more sense than to waste time arguing over the size and shape of the conference table. Now that the sector fleet had been captured, it hadn't been difficult to overwhelm the local garrisons and liberate the other worlds in the sector, freeing them to join the rebellion. The Roosevelt Family's secret stockpiles of war material and even a handful of unregistered shipyards would end up powering a war intent on bringing down the Families, once and for all. Her own task, coordinating the conversion of the local industrial base into a base that could support a massive war against the Empire, was already underway. There were few who disagreed or sought to talk peace with their former masters.

The Beyond itself was undergoing some changes, once the details of Operation Purge had been recovered from Admiral Percival's sealed databanks. The Beyond had been shocked to discover just how much the Empire had known about them, including a number of places that had been thought to be undiscovered and undetectable. Some had packed up and headed further away from the Empire; others had come forward and added their own resources to the growing Popular Front. The Empire had no idea of the sheer level of hatred and discontent along the Rim, or of how many people would come and join the rebellion as it established itself. Hannelore herself had been shocked to discover just how much was hidden out beyond the Rim, or even within it.

She wasn't too sure of her own position at times, but Cordova had vouched for her and most of the Popular Front seemed to trust him, even if not all of them *liked* the renegade Captain. Hannelore herself wasn't too sure, but she could see another person hidden under the act, a person who only emerged when they were in private. Cordova had said little about his origins, yet she was sure that he came from higher social roots than he'd been prepared to admit. Besides, who was she to comment about someone's birth? In the Popular Front, noble birth was a handicap, rather than a boon.

The three representatives from Jackson's Folly looked tired, yet determined. Admiral Percival had been toying with plans to scorch sections of their worlds — even though he had been unable to simply throw the entire planet into the fire in the hopes that it would make the daughter colonies be more reasonable — and they knew that the die was cast. If the Popular Front succeeded, Jackson's Folly and her daughter colonies would be free; if not, they would all be thrown into the fire. There could be no negotiations, save from a position of strength. If the Empire could be reformed, well and good, but if not they were prepared to burn the Empire to the ground. Hannelore couldn't blame them, even though she feared their determination. After the war was over, they would have to find some way of living together or the Empire would splinter down into civil war — another civil war.

She settled back in her seat as Hester continued to speak. The Follies were quite right. The die had been cast and there was no going back. She was committed now, as were they all.

* * *

The spy knew that she had been lucky to remain undetected, even though the rebels were now aware of her existence. At least William Derbyshire, Imperial Intelligence's Head of Station, had been smart enough to purge his files before the rebels took the station, leaving them with no direct lead to her identity.

She couldn't believe how lucky the rebels had been, as if the universe itself had been conspiring against the Empire. The mutinies in the Sector 99 Sector Fleet would only be the beginning, for Admiral Walker and his allies had tapped into a rich vein of discontent. How many people in the Imperial Navy, the spy asked herself, would share the sense that no matter how competent and capable they were, they would never be able to advance? There would be thousands; no, *hundreds* of thousands, perhaps millions. If even a tenth of the Imperial Navy decided to join the rebels, the Empire would have a

real fight on its hands.

The spy settled down in her hiding place and started to wait. There would be a chance to make contact with Imperial Intelligence again, for some who came over to the rebels would be working for the Empire, and then she would have a new link to her superiors. And even if that didn't happen, she knew her duty. There would be a chance to strike a blow at the very core of the rebel leadership. All she had to do was wait and it would come.

* * *

The two weeks since the Second Battle of Camelot had been crazy, but Colin had always found time to go to the observation blister and stare out at his growing fleet. The Imperial Navy starships, the ships from the Beyond and new designs the Geeks had put into production… a fleet capable of holding its own against a comparable Imperial Navy fleet. Earth didn't even know it yet — the first reports of the rebellion, assuming that one of Percival's subordinates had sent an unofficial signal to his patrons, wouldn't be at Earth for another month — but the Empire was in serious trouble. Colin and his fleet would be able to advance quite some distance before the Empire started putting together a superior fleet to stop them. And by then the whole equation would have changed.

Colin smiled. The Geeks had designed several other tricks, each one either a development of Imperial Navy technology or something radically new. By the time they were deployed, the Imperial Navy would be gearing up for a conventional war, not something new. He'd come a long way from the officer who had sworn a petulant oath to avenge himself on his superior; whatever happened to the rebellion and the Popular Front, the Empire would never be the same.

And then there was Khursheda and Colonel Frandsen, off on their own mission. It was a long shot, but if it worked it would do the impossible and shorten the war.

"I thought I'd find you here," Daria said. Colin turned and smiled in welcome. He hadn't seen much of Daria for the past week; she'd been busy organising the hundreds of commercial starships that had come over to the rebellion. The fleet would have better logistics than the Imperial Navy, at least at first. Once the fleet started advancing towards Earth, they would be on the end of long supply lines, while the Imperial Navy would be falling back towards its bases. "Gloating over your victory?"

"Something like that," Colin admitted, with a shrug. There was no sign of Mariko, which was odd; she was normally attached to Daria at

the hip, her silent shadow. “Percival won’t be abusing anyone, ever again.”

“No,” Daria agreed. They’d found Percival’s private collection of videos once they’d searched his quarters, including hours of footage of his aide. Colin had watched some of them and then ordered them all destroyed. Wherever Penny Quick was — and whoever had taken her off the fortress had covered his tracks very well — he hoped that she was thinking about rebelling herself. “You could have killed him.”

Colin nodded. “I thought about it,” he said. “I just” — it was hard to put it into words, even for a friend — “I just thought that if I pulled the trigger, with him helpless, part of me would die with him.”

“So you sent him to a planet that’s known for killing seventy percent of the people who are dumped on it,” Daria said, dryly. “You could have shot him and it would have been kinder.”

“At least he has a chance,” Colin said. The thought made him smile. “And besides, I wanted to make him suffer.”

Daria came up beside him and stood by his side, staring out into space. “I think you succeeded,” she said. “And now the war goes on anyway.”

“Soon,” Colin agreed. Everyone was working at a backbreaking pace, but it would be weeks yet before the fleet was ready to advance. Sector 99 would be ripe for the plucking with its sector fleet destroyed or captured, but after that it would get progressively harder. “Earth is only six months away.”

Daria laughed and took his arm. “Relax,” she said, seriously. “You don’t want to burn yourself out just yet.”

She leaned forward and Colin found himself leaning towards her, his lips moving to meet hers, when his wristcom beeped. He found himself laughing as the moment was broken, before tapping the wristcom and listening to the message.

“That had better be important,” Daria said, shaking her head. “What did they say?”

Colin grinned at her. “We just had a heavy cruiser squadron drop in,” he said. “They’re from Sector 97 and they say they want to join us.” He laughed and pulled her in for a delighted hug. “Don’t you see? The message is out and spreading. Nothing can stop us now.”

The War Will Continue In

Democracy’s Might

If you want it, please review!

Appendix: The Patronage System

To an outsider, the Empire seems to make very little sense. The system makes insane decisions — such as putting a known incompetent in command of starships or even entire fleets — and it doesn't seem to function very well, if at all. This problem is caused, in effect, by the fact that the Empire possesses no Rule of Law. The Empire may possess a Parliament and even an Independent Judiciary, but both institutions are effectively toothless. There is very little input from the Empire's population into how the Empire is run. This leads to massive abuses and, because there is no other guarantee of safety, the effective installation of a patronage system. Perversely, the system is both unofficial and the only thing that keeps the Empire together in the absence of a single unifying force.

The core idea of the system is relatively simple. The Patron — who is often rich or politically powerful — extends his patronage over the Client. This can be a brief association, not unlike a loan shark, or it can be a lifelong relationship. The Patron generally provides a degree of financial assistance, political support and even protection. The more powerful the Patron, the more he can offer his Client. In exchange, the Client places himself under the Patron and pledges to support the Patron in any way possible. The system is often unstable as some Clients may be more dependent on their Patrons than others.

This can take on many different forms, too many to detail here. A Patron might put a Client into the command chair of a starship, knowing that that would give the Patron effective control over the starship, therefore providing a military resource that could be called upon in times of need. The Client would also look after anyone else the Patron designated. For example, if there was a young officer with family links to the Patron, the Client would be expected to assist the young officer to rise higher. Or, alternatively, a Patron might put a Client into a high position within the Imperial Civil Service. The Client would be expected to use his position to further the aims of the Patron.

It doesn't require much imagination to understand that his system is easy to abuse. Patrons have been known to demand sexual services from their Clients in exchange for patronage. Worse, Patrons with more breeding than intelligence have been known to parasite off less well-connected officers and use their skills and abilities to boost their own position.

Generally, Clients come from either inside the Thousand Families (and a handful of upper-class citizens who are not technically part of the aristocracy, but wealthy and powerful in their own right) or

outside the system. Clients from the inside can actually help their Patron in many ways beyond the obvious. A person who is, officially, a mere Lieutenant may have highly-placed relations who can help his Patron. A Client from the outside, however, with few connections to the higher ranks, represents a long-term investment for the Patron. They are rarely able to help the Patron immediately and, therefore, can often be dismissed and stripped of patronage with no repercussions. (An insider Client's family may feel inclined to take revenge for any humiliation they feel their relative has suffered.)

Within the Empire, the only ways to build a position — and therefore safety, security and advancement — is to either form a patronage network or to become part of a larger patronage network. As it is highly unlikely that a newcomer could build a patronage network capable of surviving — by advancing the careers and ensuring the safety of its Clients — the Imperial system tends to be self-perpetuating. Part of the reason for this is that a person who exists outside the patronage network would have absolutely no defence if they were to be challenged by it. A known criminal with sufficiently powerful connections could be allowed to remain at liberty, while an innocent (yet unconnected) person could be targeted by the Empire's various law enforcement agencies and discover that they have little recourse. They have been effectively disenfranchised.

What this means, for the Empire as a whole, is that the most powerful people within the Empire are those who control the most powerful patronage networks. They have unmatched power to reward their followers and punish their enemies, allowing them to continue to build their networks. (The more power a person gathers, the more their power tends to grow.) Limited alliances between patronage networks create even stronger centres of power, which tend to warp the structure of the Empire as other Patrons start to respond to the new centre of gravity.

At the core of the Empire are the most powerful people in the galaxy, the Family Heads. They sit at the centre of giant webs of patronage, commanding hundreds or thousands of sub-networks, each one headed by a Patron who has a senior Patron. Many of those networks have been in existence for hundreds of years, both securing the position of the Family and locking out or controlling newcomers. The more important sub-networks are controlled by senior Family members; indeed, their success or failure with the sub-networks may improve their position to the point where they might be able to rise to the position of Family Head. Given that regeneration treatments ensure that Family Heads may live for nearly two hundred years, it isn't hard to see that the Thousand Families endure considerable internal turmoil, even outright resentment or even rebellion. Quite a

few Family Heads have died under 'mysterious circumstances.'

If you envisage the Empire as a giant game board, it becomes obvious that the players — the Patrons — must either control vital regions or prevent others from gaining complete control. The Imperial Navy, the Civil Service, Imperial Intelligence and the hundreds of other institutions represent regions that must be controlled or neutralised. Each of the Family Heads must work to control them, or risk having one of the other Family Heads gain complete control and use them to gain supreme power. This isn't an idle fear. The Third Emperor and the Empress used their control of limited sections of the Imperial armed forces to place themselves on the Throne.

The Empire's real nightmare — the one that gives Family Heads sleepless nights — is that one day the fields of patronage will run out, forcing them to actually push directly against their rivals in a conflict that will rapidly become very bloody. Fear of outright Civil War within the Thousand Families keeps fuelling a drive to secure as many Clients in vital locations as possible, which naturally causes the tension between the Families to keep rising…

Within *Democracy's Right*, there are several different Patrons and Clients.

Stacy Roosevelt was born into the inner circle of the Roosevelt Family, with a direct link to the Family Head. That gave her access to tremendous connections right from day one and, because she was part of the Family, allowed her to speak for it. Admiral Percival deferred to her because she could destroy his career with a word or boost it to levels even he refused to consider. The fact that she was grossly incompetent wasn't a problem.

Admiral Percival was born into very minor nobility, someone who inherited relatively few connections and a burning drive to succeed. He couldn't attract many insider Clients as he had little to offer them, hence his willingness to use, abuse and eventually dump outsider Clients. His undoubted skills at political infighting and backstabbing allowed him to eventually rise to the point where he was offered the patronage of the Roosevelt Family, in exchange for putting their aims and ambitions first.

Commodore Rupert Brent-Cochrane (and, to some extent, Hannelore Ellicott-Chatham) was born into an arranged marriage between two smaller Families, which were in turn linked to the Roosevelt Family. He grew up with many of the senior aristocrats looking down on him, which bred a determination to succeed and claim the position to which he believed he was entitled. The fact that he was reasonably competent allowed him to parley the connections he inherited into a formidable support network for his career.

Colin Walker and Penny Quick were both outsiders, with no claim

on any support from the establishment. Both of them were determined to succeed and, needing powerful Patrons, they allied themselves with Admiral Percival. Colin's mistake lay in not realising that Percival didn't need him and, in fact, could dump him with little or no fear of repercussions. Percival didn't trust Colin's ambition and recognised that Colin would eventually seek to surpass him. Attempting to destroy Colin's career was the logical solution. Penny, who had other charms for him, knew that her position was unstable and, when she was offered a chance to switch to another Patron, she was delighted to reach for it.

Whatever the original motives behind the Patronage system, it cannot be denied that the system is a major contributor to the Empire's problems. The young, talented and driven outsiders who can make a difference are increasingly frozen out or co-opted (and therefore neutralised) by the system. In their place, insiders and those skilled at playing political games — like Admiral Percival — rise to the top. The Empire is slowly grinding to a halt.

Series Listing

Book One: *Democracy's Right*
Book Two: *Democracy's Might* (forthcoming)
Book Three: *Democracy's Price* (forthcoming)

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